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ARRHETON – "THE UNSPEAKABLE" IN GREEK RELIGION AND LITERATURE[1]

Abstract. – The paper presents the meaning and use of two technical words important for the understanding and interpretation of the ancient mystery cults and mystical experience of the ancient Greeks: *arrheton* and *aporrheton* – "unspeakable" and "forbidden". The introduction contains general guidelines for understanding the so called 'Greek religion with its focus on performance and ritual. The role of mystery cults in the context of this adogmatic religious system is also described therein. The paper explains the lexicography of the crucial terms, including etymology, ancient vocabularies and grammar and then turns to the catalogue and interpretation of the most important literary and epigraphical evidence for the use and meaning of *arrheton* in the Greek culture. The catalogue contains Aristotle, Xenophon, Herodotus, Aristophanes, Euripides, Sophocles, Apuleius and the Derveni Papyrus, as well as early Christian writers.

Key words. – Greek religion, ancient mystery cults, Eleusis, Eleusinian mysteries, technical languages, religious language.

Greek religiosity did not only express itself in external ritual actions, but also through religious behaviours: offerings, prayers, processions, sacrifices, festivals and competitions, which were the very essence of Greek religiosity. Neither did it revolve around beliefs about gods or that which we generally understand as "faith", but rather centred around acting *kata ta patria*, according to the unwritten laws of ancestors, concerning the fulfilment of religious rituals. The example of Socrates, depicted in the memoirs of Xenophon, becomes all the more significant. Xenophon's line of defence in response to the complaint about Socrates' supposed impiety, ἀσέβεια (ἀδικεῖ Σωκράτης οὓς μὲν ἡ πόλις νομίζει θεοὺς οὐ νομίζων[2]) does not call into question the beliefs of Socrates, nor does

[1] The following text is an expanded and revised version of a text originally prepared as a conference presentation and subsequently published in Polish ("*Arrheton* – niewypowiadalne w greckich kultach misteryjnych", *Filozofia chrześcijańska* 13, Poznań 2016, pp. 37–52).

[2] Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1, 1, 4.

it analyse the understanding of the ambiguous verb νομίζειν, but focuses on proving the correctness of the rituals he performed. According to this text, Socrates could not violate εὐσέβεια – piousness, because he offered sacrifices, prayed and sought out the advice of oracles. Greek religiosity then, was a rather un-dogmatic, incoherent, and inconsistent normative system of religious laws, devoid of reference points in the form of a holy book or scriptures. It remained open to different forms of beliefs and relatively syncretic, with a huge, an almost unlimited margin for folk beliefs and magical practices as well as belief in demons, Mormolykes, vampires and werewolves. Neither did it have a hierarchical priesthood, which has given some contemporary scholars a reason for doubting if the Greek religion can be called a religion at all.[3]

Scholars often refer to Greek religiousness as to the so called "religion of the centre"; in other words, the religion of the *polis* in contrast to the "religion of the margin" that incorporates individual religiosity and mystery practices.[4]

As a part of this vast and open religious system, certain phenomena existed that clearly differed from the wide range of religious practices.[5] They were understood as a specific "closure" and concentrated on something that Christian theology calls "eschatology" and "inner experience". Mystery cults were known as τελεταί, ὄργια and μυστήρια. According to 5th century BC epigraphic material, the latter term was reserved for the most important ancient mysteries, celebrated in Eleusis.[6]

When one considers "state" or "folk" religion, it is easy to notice that there is no problem with "speaking about gods" in Greece, that which in Plato's language is described by the verbs μυθολογεῖν or θεολογεῖν.[7] It is the domain of poetry, in reference to which Plato remains so amazingly inconsistent and severe.[8] The gods are ever present in the works of Homer, Hesiod, the tragedians, they are the topics of vase painting and temple sculptures, as well as treatises written by philosophers ranging from the Ionians to Plato and the later representatives of philosophical tradition. Greek theology thus bridges philosophy and poetry (or, more generally: art).

In the case of the mystery cults, however, things appear to be different. This difference is fundamentally constituted by the existence of 'a

[3] See Henrichs 2008, pp. 1–16, with bibliography.

[4] See Sourvinou-Inwood 1990, pp. 295–322; Sourvinou-Inwood 2000, pp. 38–55; and Parker 1996, pp. 5–7.

[5] For the most recent treatment of the subject, with a complete bibliography, see Bremmer 2014.

[6] Burkert 1987, pp. 5, 8–9; Bremmer 2014, p. vii.

[7] Cf. Bielawski 2003, pp. 81–105, with bibliography.

[8] Cf. Bartol 2012, pp. 13–30.

mystery', understood precisely as "that of which you cannot / are not allowed to say" – ἄρρητον or/and ἀπόρρητον.[9] From an ancient religion historian's perspective, Early Christianity was also *par excellence* a practice of mysteries in which the category of "mystery" and the dichotomy of understanding/not-understanding or understanding correctly/incorrectly, play a vital role. We will not delve into the matter in this particular paper, but these two interesting adjectives, ἄρρητον and ἀπόρρητον, – come up in ancient Christian literature far more often than they do in the so called "pagan literature". What is more, this means that Christianity absorbed them completely, which tells us much about the nature and role of the mystery at its core. It is also interesting that Christian writers also spoke much about the unspeakable and forbidden, in contrast with their pagan predecessors, whose secrets we cannot understand to this very day and who seldom spoke of them at all.[10]

A poignant example of the attitude towards deities, who appear in full force before mortals, is provided in Homer's *Odyssey* (19, 33-43), in Telemachus' and Odysseus' revelation of the goddess Athena:

> "ὦ πάτερ, ἦ μέγα θαῦμα τόδ' ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ὁρῶμαι·
> ἔμπης μοι τοῖχοι μεγάρων καλαί τε μεσόδμαι
> εἰλάτιναί τε δοκοὶ καὶ κίονες ὑψόσ' ἔχοντες
> φαίνοντ' ὀφθαλμοῖσ' ὡς εἰ πυρὸς αἰθομένοιο.
> ἦ μάλα τις θεὸς ἔνδον, οἳ οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἔχουσι."
> τὸν δ' ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς·
> "σίγα καὶ κατὰ σὸν νόον ἴσχανε μηδ' ἐρέεινε·
> αὕτη τοι δίκη ἐστὶ θεῶν, οἵ Ὄλυμπον ἔχουσιν.
>
> "Father, verily this is a great marvel that my eyes behold; certainly the walls of the house and the fair beams and cross-beams of fir and the pillars that reach on high, glow in my eyes as with the light of blazing fire. Surely some god is within, one of those who hold broad heaven."
> Then Odysseus of many wiles answered him, and said: "Hush, check thy thought, and ask no question; this, I tell thee, is the way of the gods that hold Olympus."
>
> [transl. by A. T. Murray]

Silence and wonderment define their attitude towards the epiphany.

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[9] This topic has been discussed by Bielawski 2013, pp. 23–27; cf. Gödde 2011, p. 69 and p. 234; and Montiglio 2000, pp. 37–38, 135–137 and 237–238.

[10] The problem of ineffability has also recently been studied by philosophers and theologians; for important examples, see Jonas 2016; Moore 2003, pp. 161–176; and Bennett-Hunter 2014.

The entire technical terminology of the mystery cults is fascinating: μυστήριον derived from μύω ("I close my eyes"),[11] τελετή from τελέω ("fulfill"), and ὄργια from ἐργάζομαι ("performing"); they all capture the imagination, first and foremost, and remain closely connected with the particular understanding of religion mentioned above. Here however, let us concentrate on ἄρρητον and / or ἀπόρρητον.

The situation seems paradoxical, because in discussing the technical language of the mysteries and mystic experience, we are in a way starting off by saying that it is unutterable; or even more – we should admit that we are not only incapable of discussing this topic, but we are not even allowed to. The good news is that for the ancient Greeks, the unspeakable-ness of the religious experience was a stimulus for an even more intensive exploration and experience, and a lack of understanding brought the Greeks closer to the mystery, not further away from it.

Etymological and Lexical Studies

Both adjective forms – ἄρρητον and ἀπόρρητον – come from the word stem ἐρ- / ῥη- from *F*ερ- / *F*ρη- with the morphological base of the verb εἴρω, as one of the many Greek *verba loquendi*. The word stem comes from the Indo-European *uerh₁*- "to say, to speak [solemnly]" according to the etymological dictionary of Chantraine: *werə₁* / **wrē* – „exprimant l'idée de formuler, dire la formule".[12] From these we derive nouns such as ῥῆμα, ῥῆσις or ῥήτωρ and ῥητωρικὴ τέχνη: rhetorics, *ars bene dicendi*. The same word stem can be found in the Latin word *verbum* ("word").[13]

Word forms ending with -τος / -τον are accurately referred to as *adiectiva verbalia*, which are participle adjectives that can either describe a completed action along the lines of the Latin *participium perfecti passivi* (e.g. ποιητός meaning *factus*, "completed"), or the ability to perform activities, from which they originate (e.g. νοητός as in *putabilis*, "possible to conceive"). Ῥητός therefore has the meaning of either, "said" or "possible to be said". The word stem ἄρρητος is a close antonym of these words, reversing the sense through the effect of an *alpha privativum*. The definition thus becomes: "unsaid", "unspeakable" or "impossible to be said", *"unutterable"*.

The case is quite similar for ἀπόρρητος, derived from the defective verb ἀπειπεῖν (formally an aorist of the verb λέγω, or more specifically the word ἀπολέγω, but with a different lexical meaning), with a *futurum*

[11] See Bremmer 2014, p. vii n. 5, with bibliography, for the Hittite etymology of the word, deriving it from *munnae* – 'to conceal, to hide, to shut out of sight'. I find this interpretation convincing, although it does not substantially alter our understanding.

[12] See Beekes 2010, p. 393, and Chantraine 1968–1980, p. 326.

[13] de Vaan 2008, p. 664.

as ἀπερῶ and a *perfectum* as ἀπείρηκα. It generally means "to ban", "to deny"; thus, any *adiectivum verbale* created with the use of this word will mean "forbidden" or "something that can / should be banned."

The most important Byzantine lexica – like Suda, Hesychius, the *Etymologicum Magnum* – contain information and definitions of ancient Greek concepts, which had been carefully collected in late antiquity. They were gathered during a time when technical terms become dissociated from living language and historical context, but on the other hand during a time that had an incomparably greater number of sources than is available today. Below are their explanations for our present topic of interest:

> Suda (*s.v.*):
> ᾽Απόρρητα: ἀκατάληπτα, ἀπόκρυφα. ἀπόρρητα ἔλεγον τὰ ἀπειρημένα ἐξάγεσθαι, οὐ μόνον τὰ ἀπηγορευμένα. ἀπόρρητά τε τοῖσιν ἐχθροῖσι τοῖς ἡμετέροις λέγουσιν. ᾽Αριστοφάνης Θεσμοφοριαζούσαις. ᾽Απόρρητα, τὰ ἀπειρημένα ἐν τοῖς νόμοις. οὕτως Δημοσθένης ἐν τῷ ὑπὲρ Κτησιφῶντος. πάντα τὰ ἀπειρημένα καὶ ἀπηγορευμένα λέγουσιν. ᾽Αριστοφάνης· οὔ τι τ᾽ ἀπόρρητα δρᾶν ἐστι μέλλει. διόπερ καὶ τὰ μὴ ἐξαγώγιμα ὀνομάζουσιν οὕτω.
>
> [*Aporrheta*: unintelligible, hidden (unclear?). In other words, *aporrheta* are those things that cannot be performed, not only those that have been outlawed.[14] Aristophanes wrote in *Thesmophoriazusai*: "…and they tell our enemies what is forbidden...". *Aporrheta i.e*. the things, that are prohibited by the laws. Demosthenes in his speech in defence of Ktesiphon: "This is how they call everything, which is prohibited".[15] Aristophanes: "I do not intend to do any things that are *aporrheta.*[16]" This is why they speak of that, which one cannot pull out into the open].

In Hesychius' lexicon (*s.v.*) we can also find explanations in appropriate columns consisting of concise equivalent meanings:

> ἀπόῤῥητοι· ἄφραστοι. ῥηθῆναι μὴ δυνάμενοι
> ἀποῤῥήτους· ἀπηγορευμένους
> ἀποῤῥήτως· ἀφράστως
> ἀπόῤῥητα· ἀνεκλάλητα
>
> [*aporrhetoi*: unknown; those which cannot be spoken about out loud;
> *aporrhetous*: prohibited;
> *aporrhetos*: unutterably;
> *aporrheta*: unuttered].[17]

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[14] As in something that cannot be discussed in public.
[15] The quote not found in the preserved text of Demosthenes' orations.
[16] Fr. 622, 1.
[17] Author's translation.

In the Suda dictionary, one of the meanings that has been recalled can be described with the adjective "ominous":

> Ἄρρητον δὲ λόγον, κακόφημον, μὴ ῥηθῆναι ὀφείλοντα. Σοφοκλῆς· πῶς δῆτα λέγω λόγον ἄρρητον.
>
> [*arrheton* as a word in itself, is a word of ill meaning (ominous), one that should not be uttered. Sophocles: how are we then to speak of a word that is unuttered].[18]

Hesychius in his entry about *arrheton* lists the meanings: ineffable, uninformed, prohibited, devoid of sound, shameful (ἄφραστον, ἀνιστόρητον, ἀπόῤῥητον. Ἄφωνον. Αἰσχρόν), and recalls the invocation *arrhetos kore*, which refers to Persephone (mentioned in the lost play of Euripides, *Alexander*, *fr*. 63).

Sources and Interpretations

In book 14 of Homer's *Odyssey* (466), the author uses Odysseus as a mouthpiece to advocate that wine causes debility and makes people behave in a strange way (*e.g*. serious personages jump and sing) as well as cajole them into saying things that are better left unsaid: καί τι ἔπος προέηκεν, ὅ πέρ τ' ἄρρητον ἄμεινον.

The same words appear in Hesiod's *Works and Days* at the very beginning of the text (line 4), when he describes mortals (βροτοὶ ἄνδρες) becoming either famous or infamous (ῥητοί τ' ἄρρητοί τε), depending on the will of the great god Zeus (Διὸς μεγάλοιο ἔκητι). Quite literally, they become such persons, whose names may or may not be said – precisely, they become the ἄρρητοι: "unspoken".

It is difficult to find many appearances of the words we study in inscriptions, but when they do appear, it is always and exclusively in the context of the mysteries.

An epigrammatic votive inscription from a marble base (455 BC)[19] found in the city Eleusinion says:

> [Ἀ]ρρήτο τελετῆς πρόπολος σῆς, πότνια Δηοῖ καὶ θυγατρός προθύρο κόσμον ἄγαλμα τόδε ἔστησεν στεφάνω Λυσιστράτη οὐδὲ παρόντων φείδεται ἀλλὰ θεοῖς ἄφθονος ἐς δύναμιν.
>
> „Lysistrata, a servant to your unutterable rites, O Lady Deo [*i.e.* Demeter] and your daughter [Persephone], declares she has presented two wreaths as a beautiful gift to decorate the jamb and does not spare to [give] generously to the gods all that she can."

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[18] *Ajax* 214.

[19] *IG* I³ 953 (I 5484); see Miles 1998, p. 187, inscription no. 1.

Dio Chrysostom, in his speech (36, 33-34), says about such servants of the mysteries: "Servants of the mysteries (ὑπηρέταις τῶν τελετῶν), who outside (ἔξω περὶ θύρας), at the doors, adorn the porches and the altars set in public (πρόθυρα κοσμοῦσι καὶ βωμοὺς τοὺς ἐν τῷ φανερῷ), but never get indoors (οὐδέ ποτ' ἔνδον παριοῦσιν) […], they will perceive some of the things inside (<τῶν> ἔνδοθεν αἰσθάνεσθαί τινος), be it that one mystic word is cried out (ἤτοι ῥήματος ἐκβοηθέντος ἑνὸς μυστικοῦ), or that fire is seen above the walls (πυρὸς ὑπερφανέντος)".[20]

Both Lysistrata from the Athenian inscription and the servants mentioned in Dio's speech seem to understand ἄρρητα mostly as unutterable. Sometimes they glimpse something, hear a fragment or an odd word, but they can understand nothing. This is because, in order to understand the secret of the mysteries, one needs the whole experience, not just scraps of knowledge.

Even though the historian Herodotus uses the term *arrheton* only twice in his works (only once in the context of religious practices and mysteries), his words played a great role in the discussion on the subject. In 1912 Gilbert Murray published a very famous text entitled *Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy*.[21] He launched a discussion, which is still alive today, about the genesis of the Greek tragedy and its relations – or lack thereof – to Dionysian rites. Based on Nietzsche's thesis, according to which tragedies initially consisted only of Dionysian πάθεα,[22] Murray formulated a question which Nietzsche failed to address. Murray asked why so little is known about these πάθεα and why so few of them remain in surviving dramas. The answer to his question can be found precisely in Herodotus' category of ἄρρητον. A quote from Murray's *Excursus* seems justifiable here:

> "(1) The 'fate' of Dionysus was ἀῤῥητον and was kept unspoken through εὐφημία. Herodotus is explicit. In speaking of the mourning for Osiris which took place at the Feast of Isis he says: τὸν δὲ τύπτονται (= mourn) οὗ μοι ὅσιόν ἐστι λέγειν (2.61; 'but it would be sacrilegious of me to say who it is that they are mourning').[23]
> 2.132: ἐπεὰν δὲ τύπτωνται τὸν οὐκ οὐνομαζόμενον ὑπ' ἐμεῦ θεὸν ἐπὶ τοιούτωι πρήγματι... ('the Egyptians mourn the death of the god whom I will not name in this context').[24]
> 2.170: ταφαὶ τοῦ οὐκ ὅσιον ποιοῦμαι ἐπὶ τοιούτωι πρήγματι ἐξαγορεύειν τοὔνομα ('tomb of the god whose name it would be sacrile-

[20] See Burkert 1987, p. 90, and the translation quoted above.

[21] Murray 1912, pp. 341–363, quoted below from Segal 1998, pp. 97–98.

[22] Nietzsche 1999, pp. 51–52.

[23] Trans. by R. Waterfield, Herodotus, *The Histories*, ed. by C. Dewland, Oxford 1998, p. 119. See Gödde 2007, pp. 41–90.

[24] Ibidem, p. 147.

> gious of me to mention in this context').[25] In 2.86, similar language is used about the mummy of the god whose name must not be mentioned in connection with death. The god in question was of course Osiris. Now apparently it was not forbidden in Egypt to mention Osiris' death; but to Herodotus Osiris is Dionysus, and if he treats the death of Osiris as ἄρρητον that must be because the death of Dionysus was so".

Murray's arguments are reminiscent of the second – next to ἄρρητον – important category related to man's attitude to mysteries in ancient Greece: εὐφημία – "sacred silence".[26] Instructions are found in two lines from the Delphic sentences: Εὔφημος ἴσθι ("keep sacred silence") and Εὐφημίαν ἄσκει ("train yourself in sacred silence"). Additionally, the chorus of the first song in the *Bacchae* demands this (69-70): στόμα τ' εὔφημον ἅπας ἐξοσιούσθω ("let everybody by keeping sacred silence make himself pure").[27]

Sophocles in *Oedipus at Colonos* (1001) retorts with bitter words to Creon, accusing him of being unjust (Σὺ δ', εἶ γὰρ οὐ δίκαιος), believing that Oedipus has the right to say whatever he wants (ἀλλ' ἅπαν καλὸν / λέγειν νομίζων) – both what is allowed and what is prohibited (ῥητὸν ἄρρητόν τ' ἔπος). Once again, *arrheton* seems to be something not to be spoken about. It is important to understand that *arrheton* in this case does not mean anything evil, but it is evil to mention something that is "unspeakable", "prohibited", "forbidden". It does not describe the morality of a deed, phrase or gesture, but indicates the act of exposing them to the public. In other words, an opinion about something or someone does not have to be evil or good – what *is* evil is its disclosure.

The case of Aeschylus[28] – the Eleusinian *arrheton*

Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (III, 1, 1111a) recalls one story of Aeschylus –quite popular in later sources – in which *arrheton* plays a key role:

> ὃ δὲ πράττει ἀγνοήσειεν ἄν τις, οἷον †λέγοντές φασιν ἐκπεσεῖν αὐτούς,† ἢ οὐκ εἰδέναι ὅτι ἀπόρρητα ἦν, ὥσπερ Αἰσχύλος τὰ μυστικά.
>
> "But a man may be ignorant of what he is doing, as for instance when people say 'it slipped out while they were speaking,' or 'they

[25] Ibidem, p. 163.
[26] Cf. Gödde 2011, passim.
[27] Translation by Seaford 1996, p. 71; cf. Dodds 1989, p. 75.
[28] For a complete collection of the sources, with apparatus and bibliography, see Radt 1985, pp. 63–64. Cf. Ameduri 1964, pp. 23–36, and Solomon 1982, pp. 101–105.

were not aware that the matter was a secret,' as Aeschylus said of the Mysteries".[29]

According to the tradition, Aeschylus was accused of betraying the secret of the Eleusinian Mysteries and thus subjected to a court case condemning the violation of secret mysteries, as a crime against piety. Herakleides Pontikos in his work about Homer[30] (fragment 170 Wehrli), quoted in the anonymous commentary to the *Nicomachean Ethics* (II, 145, 26-32), says:

> Λέγει δὲ περὶ Αἰσχύλου καὶ Ἡρακλείδης ὁ Ποντικὸς ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ Περὶ Ὁμήρου, ὡς κινδυνεύοντος ἐπὶ σκηνῆς ἀναιρεθῆναι ἐπὶ τῷ τῶν μυστικῶν περιφέρειν τινὰ δοκεῖν, εἰ μὴ προαισθόμενος κατέφυγεν ἐπὶ τὸν τοῦ Διονύσου βωμόν, καὶ Ἀρεοπαγιτῶν αὐτὸν παραιτησαμένων ὡς ὀφείλοντα κριθῆναι πρῶτον, ἐδόκει ὑπαχθῆναι εἰς δικαστήριον καὶ ἀποφυγεῖν, αὐτὸν τῶν δικαστῶν ἀφέντων μάλιστα διὰ τὰ πραχθέντα αὐτῷ ἐν <τῇ ἐπὶ> Μαραθῶνι μάχῃ.
>
> Also Heracleides Ponticus says about Aeschylus in the first book of his work On Homer, that he was in danger of being killed on stage for revealing some of the mysteries, unless he had foreseen this and fled to the altar of Dionysus, and the Areopagites having dismissed him as deserving to be judged first, he seemed to be brought to trial and escape, the judges having acquitted him, especially for what had been done to him in the battle of Marathon.

Aeschylus was in danger of being killed right on the theatrical scene – ἐπὶ σκηνῆς (one must assume that he was performing in his own play).[31] He managed to escape, however, and managed to find *asylon* near the altar of Dionysus (ἐπὶ τὸν τοῦ Διονύσου βωμόν); later, after the trial before the Areopagus, he was cleared of all charges, either because of the merits of his brother, or – according to other sources – because of his own heroic deeds in the battle of Marathon.[32]

The story was also passed on, in a slightly altered version, by Aelian (*Variae Historiae* 5.19, below) who tells the story using much more dramatic narrative:

> Αἰσχύλος ὁ τραγῳδὸς ἐκρίνετο ἀσεβείας ἐπί τινι δράματι. ἑτοίμων οὖν ὄντων Ἀθηναίων βάλλειν αὐτὸν λίθοις, Ἀμεινίας ὁ νεώτερος ἀδελφὸς διακαλυψάμενος τὸ ἱμάτιον ἔδειξε τὸν πῆχυν ἔρημον τῆς

[29] Trans. by H. Rackham, Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, London 1926 (Loeb), p. 125.

[30] See Riedweg 1987, pp. 130–131.

[31] Cf. Lesky 1983, pp. 37–38, and Gagné 2009, pp. 220–221.

[32] Cf. the anonymous commentary to the fragment of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

> χειρός. ἔτυχε δὲ ἀριστεύων ἐν Σαλαμῖνι ὁ Ἀμεινίας ἀποβεβληκὼς τὴν χεῖρα, καὶ πρῶτος Ἀθηναίων τῶν ἀριστείων ἔτυχεν. ἐπεὶ δὲ εἶδον οἱ δικασταὶ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς τὸ πάθος, ὑπεμνήσθησαν τῶν ἔργων αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἀφῆκαν τὸν Αἰσχύλον.
>
> "The tragedian Aeschylus was brought to trial on a charge of impiety arising from a play. The Athenians were prepared to stone him, but his younger brother Ameinias rolled back his cloak and displayed the arm which had lost a hand; it happened that Ameinias had performed an exploit at Salamina which cost him a hand, and he was the first of the Athenians to be decorated for valour. When the jurors saw what the man had endured, they recalled his actions and let Aeschylus go free".[33]

The passage has often been – correctly – juxtaposed with the story by Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* 2, 14, 145), where he recalls the words of Aeschylus, claiming that he was never initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries:[34]

> […] Αἰσχύλος τὰ μυστήρια ἐπὶ σκηνῆς ἐξειπὼν ἐν Ἀρείῳ πάγῳ κριθεὶς οὕτως ἀφείθη ἐπιδείξας αὐτὸν μὴ μεμυημένον.
>
> "Aeschylus, who divulged the mysteries on the stage, who, being tried in the Areopagus, was absolved on his showing that he had not been initiated".

We thus have three different variants of reasoning behind the poet's release from charges of treason by exposure of the Eleusinian Mysteries on the Athenian theatre stage. Figuring out which reason is most likely is quite difficult. What is essential, though, is the fact that such an event – an unconscious betrayal of ἄρρητον – actually took place.

Ἄρρητα concerning the Eleusinian Mysteries, as well as the "the case of Aeschylus", also appear in Xenophon's *Hellenica* (6.3.6). The terms τὰ Δήμητρος καὶ Κόρης ἄρρητα ἱερὰ – "holy, unspeakable rites of Demeter and Core" – are present in the speech of an Eleusinian priest, the *dadouchos*, Calias, addressed to the Spartans:

> Δίκαιον μὲν οὖν ἦν μηδὲ ὅπλα ἐπιφέρειν ἀλλήλοις ἡμᾶς, ἐπεὶ λέγεται μὲν Τριπτόλεμος ὁ ἡμέτερος πρόγονος τὰ Δήμητρος καὶ Κόρης ἄρρητα ἱερὰ πρώτοις ξένοις δεῖξαι Ἡρακλεῖ τε τῷ ὑμετέρῳ ἀρχηγέτῃ καὶ Διοσκούροιν τοῖν ὑμετέροιν πολίταιν, καὶ τοῦ Δήμητρος δὲ καρποῦ εἰς πρώτην τὴν Πελοπόννησον σπέρμα δωρήσασθαι.

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[33] Trans. by N. G. Wilson, Aelian, *Historical Miscellany*, Cambridge Mass., 1997 (Loeb), p. 225-227.

[34] Bremmer (2014, p. 4) argues that Clement probably misunderstood his sources.

> "The right course, indeed, would have been for us not to take arms against one another in the first place, since the tradition is that the first strangers to whom Triptolemus, our ancestor, revealed the mystic rites [ἄρρητα ἱερά] of Demeter and Core were Heracles, your state's founder, and the Dioscuri, your citizens; and, further, that it was upon Peloponnesus that he first bestowed the seed of Demeter's fruit".[35]

The Unspeakable

The *unspeakable*, especially in a religious perspective, related to religious experience and the mysteries – in this case, the Dionysian – appears in Euripides' *Bacchae* (471-474), where Dionysus explains the importance of ἄρρητον, knowledge available only to select few, inaccessible to the uninitiated (ἀβακχεύτοισιν). At the same time, knowledge of the ἄρρητον appears to be extremely useful; it is something worth knowing and something that brings great benefits (ὄνησιν, ἄξια). In Dionysus' words, ἄρρητον is a category associated with the process of cognition (εἰδέναι), which leads to the understanding of their actual meaning (ἰδέαν):

> Πε. τὰ δ' ὄργι' ἐστὶ τίν' ἰδέαν ἔχοντά σοι;
> Δι. ἄρρητ' ἀβακχεύτοισιν εἰδέναι βροτῶν.
> Πε. ἔχει δ' ὄνησιν τοῖσι θύουσιν τίνα;
> Δι. οὐ θέμις ἀκοῦσαί σ', ἔστι δ' ἄξι' εἰδέναι.
>
> According to D. Kovacs' translation:[36]
> "Pentheus: The rites – what is their nature?
> Dionysus: They may not be told to the uninitiated.
> Pentheus: But those who perform them – what kind of benefit do they get?
> Dionysus: You are not allowed to hear – though the rites are well worth knowing".

In literary texts the adjective "unspeakable" also accompanies sacred rites: ὄργια (in *Bacchae* 470-472, above), sacred objects carried and celebrated during the mysteries – ἱερά (*e.g.* Aristophanes, *Clouds* 302), the Eleusinian Mysteries themselves (Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazousai* 442, Euripides, *Rhesos* 943). And also Core – Persephone is called "unspeakable" (Euripides' *Helen* in 1307, and fragment 64).[37]

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[35] Trans. by C. L. Brownson, Xenophon, *Hellenica, books VI-VII, Anabasis, books 1-3*, London 1921 (Loeb), p. 41-43.

[36] Euripides, *Bacchae, Iphigenia in Aulis, Rhesus*, ed. by D. Kovacs, Cambridge Mass., 2002 (Loeb), p. 53.

[37] Cf. Kerényi 1967, pp. 26–29.

The Mysteries, the mystery cults, were *arrheta* and *aporrheta par excellence*. The secret was absolute,[38] and the obligation to keep it radical and categorical. Walter Burkert in his *Ancient Mystery Cults* argues that both these adjectives have an interchangeable meaning,[39] but in the monumental *Greek Religion* he leaves the question of whether what was most "sacred" in the mysteries was "forbidden" (ἀπόρρητον) or rather "unspeakable" (ἄρρητον) unanswered.[40] At the same time however, he signals that "what was central and decisive was not accessible to verbalization".[41] The theory of these two terms' functional interchangeability constantly returns – also in Burkert's works[42] – as an opinion that the issue of *unutterability* was merely a tool artificially supporting a dirty secret, helping to increase the curiosity of potential participants and raising the attractiveness of the festivities.

I do not think the meanings of these words were fully interchangeable and were understood as such. On the one hand, they meant ἀπόρρητα – things forbidden, because speaking of them was prohibited and their betrayal was severely punished. On the other hand, this did not change or diminish the fact that ἄρρητα determined what is unutterable, impossible to be expressed in words. The case of Aeschylus, which we previously discussed, seems to imply that the "un-utterability" of the Eleusinian Mysteries was limited, and this, in turn, means that despite their obscurity, despite the elusiveness of the essence of initiation, one could accidentally utter the words, which were directly or even exclusively connected to the context of the *Telesterion*. This would lead to the conclusion that ἄρρητον was simultaneously ἀπόρρητον, but only in that order, and not *vice versa*, nor interchangeably. The inability to express the mystery experience, the inadequacy of language in describing the intensity and uniqueness of the discourse, was perceived as limited and required additional security.

Hesitantly, I will refer to three more passages connected to ἄρρητον. Hesitantly, because they come from late and Christian apologetic sources – Clement and Hippolytus' – and because, given their apologetic nature, they must be treated with extreme caution. However I shall use them – no matter to what extent and for what purpose they distort the reality that they recall. Each one of them is directly related to the Eleusinian Mysteries and they seem to prove that ἄρρητον should be understood as "incomprehensible", since they argue that even if we knew the initiation process, we would still not know what to do with the message.

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[38] Cf. Bowden 2010, pp. 23–24.
[39] Burkert 1987, p. 9.
[40] Burkert 1985, p. 276.
[41] Burkert 1987, p. 69.
[42] Ibidem. See also Montiglio 2000, pp. 37–38.

In his *Protrepticus* (2, 21, 2, repeated by Arnobius 5, 26), Clement of Alexandria presents the famous σύνθημα: the word-key to understanding the Mysteries:[43]

> «ἐνήστευσα, ἔπιον τὸν κυκεῶνα, ἔλαβον ἐκ κίστης, ἐργασάμενος ἀπεθέμην εἰς κάλαθον καὶ ἐκ καλάθου εἰς κίστην.»
>
> "I fasted, I drank *kykeon*, I took it out from the chest, having done my task, I placed it in the basket, and from the basket into the chest".[44]

Hippolytos on the other hand quotes a certain Gnostic writer who had been a part of the "Snake Sect", called Naasen, and recalls the description of the mysteries in two short passages (*Refutatio omnium hæresium*, 5, 8, 39-40):[45]

> Ἀθηναῖοι, μυοῦντες Ἐλευσίνια καὶ ἐπιδεικνύντες τοῖς ἐποτεύουσι τὸ μέγα καὶ θαυμαστὸν καὶ τελέωτατον ἐποπτικὸν ἐκεῖ μυστήριον ἐν σιωπῇ, τεθερισμένον στάχυν.
>
> "Athenians during the celebration of the Eleusinian Mysteries to those who are *epoptai* silently display the great, admirable mystery – a harvested ear of grain".
>
> And further:
>
> Νυκτὸς ἐν Ἐλευσῖνι ὑπὸ πολλῷ πυρὶ τελῶν τὰ μεγάλα καὶ ἄρρητα μυστήρια βοᾷ καὶ κἐκραγε λέγων· »ἱερὸν ἔτεκε πότνια κοῦρον Βριμὼ Βριμόν«, τουτέστιν ἰσχυρὰ ἰσχυρόν.
>
> "At night in Eleusis, the Hierophant celebrating the great and unspeakable mysteries (τὰ μεγάλα καὶ ἄρρητα μυστήρια) by the great fire exclaims in a loud voice: The Lady has born a saintly son, Bromio has birthed Bromios!"

Both of these fragments are called "secret codes" by Burkert and remain expressively ἄρρητα – impossible to understand without the context of the experience.

And below, yet another testimony from Hippolytos (*Refutatio omnium haeresium*, 5, 7, 34):

> Τοῦτο ... ἐστὶ τὸ μέγα καὶ ἄρρητον τῶν Ἐλεσινίων μυστήριον »ὗε, κύε«.

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[43] Cf. the cmmentary in Burkert 1987, p. 94

[44] Author's translation; *cf.* Clement of Alexandria, *The Exhortation to the Greeks, The Rich Man's Salvation*, trans. by G. W. Butterworth, London 1919 (Loeb), p. 43.

[45] Author's translation. Cf. Scarpi 2007, pp. 524–526.

> "This is the great and unspeakable Eleusinian Mystery: ‹Rain falls, conception begins›".[46]

The problem of ineffability can perhaps be linked to the famous words of Aristotle (section 15 of Synesius Dion's work),[47] meaning that the initiated should not learn / understand / find out, in Greek: μάθεῖν, but only experience / feel: παθεῖν (καθάπερ Ἀριστοτέλης ἀξιοῖ τοὺς τελουμένους οὐ μαθεῖν τι δεῖν ἀλλὰ παθεῖν καὶ διατεθῆναι, δηλονότι γενομένους ἐπιτηδείους).

There are two more passages to be discussed, though the words of interest apparently do not appear in them. However, they seem to correctly describe the very nature of the mysteries' "un-spoken-ness". The first comes from Apuleius, namely, from the 11th book of *Metamorphoses*; the second is from the equally well-known 7th column of the Derveni Papyrus.

> Apuleius XI, 23:[48]
> "Thou wouldest peradventure demand, thou studious reader, what was said and done there: verily I would tell thee if it were lawful for me to tell, thou wouldest know if it were convenient for thee to hear; but both thy ears and my tongue should incur the like pain of rash curiosity [*Dicerem, si dicere liceret, cognosceres, si liceret audire. Sed parem noxam contraherent et aures et lingua, <ista impiae loquacitatis>, illae temerariae curiositatis*]. Howbeit I will not long torment thy mind, which peradventure is somewhat religious and given to some devotion; listen therefore, and believe it to be true. Thou shalt understand that I approached near unto hell, even to the gates of Proserpine, and after that I was ravished throughout all the elements, I returned to my proper place: about midnight I saw the sun brightly shine, I saw likewise the gods celestial and the gods infernal, before whom I presented myself and worshipped them. Behold now have I told thee, which although thou hast heard, yet it is necessary that thou conceal it; wherefore this only will I tell, which may be declared without offence for the understanding of the profane [*Ecce tibi rettuli, quae, quamvis audita, ignores tamen necesse est*]."

The last sentence of Lucius' monologue is of crucial importance here, in which we read that even hearing the mystery of mysteries, which in itself is ineffable (*si dicere liceret*) – *arrheton* in Greek – does not lead to understanding. What's more: the words of the *arrheton* not only remain

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[46] Translated by the Author. Cf. Scarpi 2007, pp. 523-524.

[47] Synesius Dion. 10 p. 271 Krab. (*cf*. Dio Chrys., *Or*. 12, 33 *sq*.).

[48] Trans. by S. Gaselee, *Apuleius, The Golden Ass Being the Metamorphoses of Lucius Apuleius*, London 1915 (Loeb), p. 581.

incomprehensible to the uninitiated, but it is in their specific nature to mislead the unprepared listener, "you need to not-understand" (*ignores tamen necesse est*).[49]

The Derveni Papyrus has a similar understanding of mystery (col. VII, 4-11):

> "His poetry is something strange and riddling for people. But Orpheus did not intend to tell them trivial riddles, but momentous things in riddles. Indeed, he is telling a holy discourse from the first and up to his last word. As he also makes clear in the well-chosen verse: for having ordered them to put doors to their ears he says that he is [? not legislating] for the many... [? but only for] those pure in hearing...".[50]

Studying the words of the Derveni Papyrus, I wonder whether or not this text explains, to some extent, the need to "protect" the secrets of the mysteries through a double sanctioned use of the category *aporrheton* despite its ineffability. Perhaps it was exactly through poetry, allegory and metaphor, that the ineffable was threatened.[51]

Sophocles describes the Eleusinian Mysteries in a similar fashion in his *Oedipus at Colonus* (1050-1054):[52]

> οὗ πότνιαι σεμνὰ τιθηνοῦνται τέλη
> θνατοῖσιν ὧν καὶ χρυσέα
> κλῃὶς ἐπὶ γλώσσᾳ βέβα-
> κε προσπόλων Εὐμολπιδᾶν·
>
> "Where the divine ladies nurse the august rites
> of mortals on whose tongues rests
> the golden key
> of the attendant sons of Eumolpus!"

Sophocles' "golden key" metaphorically evokes a category of special importance, which requires safeguarding, respect and special treatment. Ἄρρητον thus refers to the experience, the strength reflected in crossing borders of verbalization, and the inability to denounce or confirm its value.

To understand mysteries?

The category of unspeakability is perhaps the most important distinctive feature of the ancient mysteries. What separates the mysteries

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[49] Cf. the commentary in Griffiths 1975, pp. 293–308.
[50] Text and translation by Betegh 2004, p. 17.
[51] Cf. ibidem, p. 90, 360-364.
[52] Transl. by H. Lloyd-Jones, Sophocles, *Antigone, The Women of Trachis, Philoctetes, Oedipus at Colonus*, Cambridge Mass. (Loeb), 1994, p. 531.

from other forms of religious worship is, in the first place, mystery – that which is unknown and veiled. This mystery has, as it were, two levels – let us call them external and internal. The first is of a "technical", "regulative", one might say "physical" nature, related to the separation of the place and the activities taking place in it from what is public, accessible to all. It is a mystery transcendent of its own essence. This layer of mystery can be broken through intrusion – by means of trickery, voyeurism or by force – into direct contact with what is physically, technically closed, covered; one can enter the restricted circle of the initiated, *i.e.* those who, on the one hand, have been admitted to the knowledge of what is hidden, and, on the other, are those who create the cordon separating the visible from the covered. The second layer of mystery connected to the mysteries is of an internal character, immanent to its essence, creating not so much the environment in which a particular religious experience is attainable, but rather the content and essence of that experience. And everything points to the fact that this mystery cannot be broken, neither by trickery nor by force. Nor can it be peeped at.

Paradoxically, both types of mysterious secrecy – as the analyses above show – are defined by the terms ἄρρητον and ἀπόρρητον.[53]

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