

Myth, Dialogue and the Allegorical Interpretation of Plato

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From the late Classical period until the Nineteenth Century, Plato was admired for his inspiration and vision, rather than for his theories and argumentation. Then with the advent of analytic philosophy in the Twentieth Century, the pendulum swung hard in the other direction. Plato's myths were largely ignored. The drama of his dialogues was considered insignificant. The theory of forms and the theory of recollection (as a gloss on immortality) became the pillars of Platonism, and the journals became filled with careful, logical analyses of Platonic principles, theories, and hypotheses. Recently even mainstream Plato scholars have tried to redress the overemphasis on Platonic theory, but they have limited themselves mostly to arguing that image, myth, and characterisation are important to the interpretation of Plato in addition to concepts, theories, and dialectic. This paper argues that myth and dialogue play a much more central role in Platonic philosophy than is currently accepted. There is evidence that Plato treats the dialogues themselves as framing myths, within which all action and dialogue is treated as mimesis, rather than as direct presentation of Plato's *logoi*. If this is correct, then each of Plato's works is organised around the representation of a comprehensive poetic vision not stated in, but rather only through, the action of the dialogue.

I. Prelude: Melville and Plato

Plato's images are the main subject of this paper, but I shall begin with an image from another great mythmaker and allegorical writer, Herman Melville. At just around the mid-point of Melville's *Moby Dick*, Tashtego, the native-American harpooner of Stubb's boat, has a near-fatal accident. He has been standing upon the head of a half-butchered sperm whale, which had been harnessed to the side of the *Pequod* for fine dissection and careful removal of its precious ointments, when he inexplicably slips and tumbles twenty feet or more inside the cleaved head, until he is completely out of sight. Dagoo's well-intentioned efforts to save him only make the situation worse, as the head breaks free of its cables and begins a long sink to the bottom. Had it not been for Queequeg hurtling into the sea, and practicing the art of midwifery

upon the sinking head, Tashtego was a goner. Reflecting on the incident, Melville observes:

Now, had Tashtego perished in that head, it had been a very precious perishing; smothered in the very whitest and daintiest of fragrant spermaceti; coffined, hearsed, and tombed in the secret inner chamber and sanctum sanctorum of the whale. Only one sweeter end can readily be recalled — the delicious death of an Ohio honey-hunter, who seeking honey in the crotch of a hollow tree, found such exceeding store of it, that leaning too far over, it sucked him in, so that he died embalmed. How many, think ye, have likewise fallen into Plato's honey head, and sweetly perished there? (*Moby Dick*, 78.15)¹

I want to begin by reaffirming that the ambrosial contents of Plato's "honey-head", as Melville calls it, are not his doctrines or theories or philosophical views. No one perishes sweetly in *them*. Rather, the fatal Platonic sap is none other than the product of his unfathomable imagination: the myths, the allegories, the similes, analogies and ultimately the dialogues themselves. It is the perfume of the *image* that draws us in and ultimately binds us to Plato; the only question is whether that sticky bond holds us to a death sentence (as Melville seems to think) or a lifeline.

Plato's images range from grand vision the most simply adumbrated idea. At the one extreme we find vast eschatological myths like the famous "myth of Er" at the end of the *Republic*, in which the soul of a not-quite-dead-yet soldier, Er, makes his way through the cavernous, organic otherworld, and returns to present a description, and a caution, to those who might still change their lives. The myth of Er includes a vision of the great plain of the afterlife, which Er is permitted to see, and a description of the regions beyond — the sinus of Heaven and the belly of the Earth — of which Er is only allowed a hearing. Er beholds the mechanism of the entire cosmos, operated by the agents of Necessity, and he is witness to the lottery and choice of reincarnation. The myth has an air of mystery-religion about it, but its details are distinctively Platonic, right down to the soul of patient Odysseus choosing a quiet, philosophical life. The image is unforgettable.

At the other extreme are simple figures of speech that were to acquire doctrinal significance in the history of Platonism: the *idea*, or outward appearance, that was transformed in theory into the all-beautiful form of inner reality; *ton hêlion*, the sun, symbol of all that is good, or the *dêmiourgos*, the word for "artisan" that was to become the name of God Himself.

In between these extremes we find images of all shapes and sizes, of a highly advanced civilisation in Atlantis, of the former existence of humans as two-headed, eight-limbed creatures, of the fabrication of the entire universe by a cosmic artisan, of the subterranean cinema in which we play out our lives, of Gyges' ring. There is hardly any significant theme in Plato that is not mediated by a myth or vivid analogy. Why is self-knowledge difficult? Because the body acts like a tomb that encases the soul, growing thicker as one lives, and burying the pure light of understanding

¹ The reference indicates chapter and paragraph in any standard edition of *Moby Dick*.

ever deeper inside encrustations until, like the Sea-Glaucus, the very principle of its life, the soul, can no longer be seen, either by others or oneself. Why is democracy unmanageable? Because it is like a huge, many-headed beast that, when fed, simply sprouts more heads from its bloated, amoebic corpse. Ever aching for more, its ten thousand mouths cry out incessantly with inconsistent demands for food and spice and wine and drugs and potions. How do we make mistakes in judgment? Because the mind is like a dovecote so full of flocking pigeons that when we go to retrieve one, we get another by mistake. How do we make mistakes in action? Because we are like puppets of the gods, pulled now in this direction by one set of strings, and now in the other by others, and we fail to cling tight to the golden cord of reason by which alone we might always be safe.

II. Neoplatonism and the allegorical interpretation of Plato

These and many other images fill Plato's dialogues. Yet we now experience them from a comfortable, scholarly distance, and taste the Platonic honey in a very superficial way. Once upon a time, it was different. From the late third century CE until the end of the eighteenth century, orthodox interpretations of Plato proceeded allegorically, according to assumptions of Neoplatonist exegesis. For our purposes the key assumption is that the dialogues of Plato are, *in toto*, allegories of a more esoteric view. Neoplatonists from Iamblichus to Proclus treated the setting, characters, preludes, themes and substance of the dialogues as allegorical. A good example of just how far this allegorising went can be found in Proclus' commentary on the *Parmenides* of Plato. Proclus interprets the first sentence of the *Parmenides* — which just says, “When we arrived in Athens from our home in Clazomenae, we encountered Adeimantus and Glaucon in the agora” (126a, Morrow & Dillon)² — as follows:

The gods who guide nature and comprise the various powers of enmattered forms, i.e. all the individual and perceptible reason-principles, are dependent on the primary cause; and being illumined by Athena to turn their attention towards the intelligible world, abstract themselves from the cosmic system (for this also is called the home of the gods that are in it), are lifted up to see the unified plurality in things, and there by divine power advance to the monad that contains the primary plurality. Of all these things the words quoted contain a likeness, for those not altogether unacquainted with such matters. (*In Parmenidem* 661, Morrow & Dillon)

Proclus is the chief representative of a tradition prone to arcane elaborations of Plato: the 1324 columns of his commentary cover only 16 pages of the *Parmenides*

² For references to Plato I have adopted the standard convention of locating texts by reference to sections of the edition by Henri Estienne (L: Stephanus) in 1578. For references to other Classical works I have also used standard conventions, e.g. reference to column numbers in works of Proclus, or the reference to page and column in the 1831 Berlin edition of Aristotle by Immanuel Bekker.

(126a–142a). Melville’s warning concerns the dangers of allegorising Plato like this. The initial attraction with Platonic myths and analogies, felt by everyone, draws the unsuspecting innocent in, until every word takes on metaphorical significance. In the Neoplatonic tradition, the *klinê* of *Republic X* becomes not just a symposium couch, but a metonym for the whole of Athenian culture. The *prothuron* on which Socrates stands thinking in the *Symposium*, is not just a veranda, but also the threshold of the Good itself. The *chalinós*, or bridle, that Antiphon presents to the smith in *Parmenides* 127a is a symbol for the “means appointed by the higher powers for regulation of the dependent faculties” (Proclus *In Parmenidem* 678, trans. Morrow & Dillon). The *diadochon* in Plato’s analogy between law and painting (*Laws* VI.769d4), comes to represent not just any successor, but a psychic surrogate who participates in symbacchic unity with Plato himself. In Neoplatonic hands, even prepositions: *anô*, *katô*, *metaxu* (above, below, between) are redolent of deeper meaning. Proclus, it would seem, became so intoxicated inside Plato’s honey-head that he vomited holy gibberish. Yet, for all that, as R.F. Hathaway observed:

Neoplatonism was one of the most powerful forces that shaped the tradition of philosophy, ... it had a perhaps decisive role in the philosophical theology of medieval times, and ... it still has certain charms both for students of the dialogues of Plato and for many others who are not *ex professo* philosophers. More important, we can never be sure that we too will not be misled in the same way that the Neoplatonists were misled and by the same features of Plato’s dialogues. (1969:19)

Melville and Hathaway both recognise the power of attraction in Plato’s images, and both caution against the consequences of being misled by them. But their caution is external and habitual; it is the remnant of an all-out attack on Neoplatonism that began in the end of the 18th Century. In *The Decline and Fall of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato*, Eugene Tigerstedt showed how the rise of history as an academic discipline, and particularly the development of historical criticism spelled the death-knell of Neoplatonism. According to Tigerstedt, it was by Friedrich Schliermacher’s insistence that interpreters set aside attempts to imbue the dialogues with allegorical meaning and “confine their interpretation of Plato to the Dialogues alone” that “the real Plato” (1974:5–6) was ultimately revealed. Schleiermacher’s success is marked by the desuetude into which studies of Plato’s myths fell throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

III. The separation of Plato’s myths from the dialogues

Deprived of independent allegorical significance, Plato’s myths became little more than dialogical remoras. They were seen as attachments to the main body, riding along with it, more or less at its expense. Schleiermacher and the historical critics were so successful that when J.A. Stewart brought out the first edition of *The Myths of Plato* in 1905, the battle to treat Plato’s myths as anything more than addenda was already

effectively lost. Stewart was concerned that what he considered to be an integral element of Plato's philosophy was no longer getting any attention, but he had already fatally internalised the basic principle of Schleiermacher's approach, which is to treat "argument" as primary. In his introduction Stewart writes:

The Platonic Dialogue may be broadly described as a Drama in which speech is the action and Socrates and his companions are the actors. The speech in which the action consists is *mainly* that of *argumentative* conversation in which, although Socrates or another may take a leading part, yet everybody has his say. The conversation or *argument* is always about matters which can be profitably discussed — that is, matters on which men form *workaday opinions* which discussion may show to be right or wrong, wholly or in part. But it is only *mainly* that the Platonic Drama consists in argumentative conversation. It contains another element, the Myth, which, though not ostensibly present in some Dialogues, is so striking in others, some of them the greatest, that we are compelled to regard it, equally with the argumentative conversation, as essential to Plato's philosophical style. (1905:24)

Stewart's admission that the dialogues are "mainly ... argumentative conversation" accepts the inferior status of the myths, however much he may protest that, on occasion, they deserve to be regarded equally. In such a situation, allegorical interpretation can serve no constructive purpose: the allegorical meaning of a myth can be nothing other than what appears more plainly in workaday opinions. As if he sensed the basic implausibility of subordinating Plato's myths to workaday opinions, Stewart detached them from the dialogues. In the preface to the first edition Stewart explained his reasons for separating the myths from the rest of Plato. He says:

The object of this volume is to furnish the reader with material for estimating the characteristics and influence of Plato the Mythologist, or Prophet, as distinguished from Plato the Dialectician, or Reasoner. In order to effect this special object within a reasonable space, it was necessary to extract the Myths from the Dialogues in which they occur, with only the shortest possible indication of the Context in each case, and to confine the Observations to the Myths as individual pieces and as a series. The reader, therefore, must not expect to find in the Observations on, say, the *Phaedo* Myth or the *Phaedrus* Myth a Study of the *Phaedo* or the *Phaedrus*. (1905: preface, ¶1)

Unfortunately, this move was to have an even worse effect than subordinating myth to opinion. Although he protests, quite rightly, that "Myth is an organic part of the Platonic Drama, not an added ornament" (1905:24), Stewart's detachment of the myths from their dramatic contexts underscores the contrary opinion, which he must have secretly accepted, that myth and reason are fundamentally separate things. This is a view that no Neoplatonist could have accepted, and by upholding it, Stewart played into the hands of the historico-critical interpretation of Plato, which saw no independent philosophical value in myths.

Stewart could abide the separation of myth from reason because, as Gertrude Levy pointed out, he located the importance of myth in such experiences as transcendental feeling, the psychological state of ecstasy, and the need for spiritual nourishment

(Stewart, 1960:4–5). But the result was that he treated the myths of Plato almost as expressions of Faith.³ The significance of Plato's myths, however, needs to be understood not by contrast to reason, but precisely in the context of Platonic rationality.⁴ The dialogues are replete with criticisms of barely religious myths and irrational belief.⁵ There is no indication that Plato sees his own myths in terms anything like the modern contrast between Faith and Reason.

Stewart's two errors — the subordination of myth to opinion and the separation of "religious" myth from "rational" dialectic — had a double effect on subsequent Plato scholarship. For a long time the separation was simply accepted. Although scholars would sometimes puzzle briefly over the inclusion of a myth in a Platonic dialogue, it was possible to treat it as an unimportant relic that did not have any serious importance to the doctrines of "the real Plato". So the myth of Er was only a small part of Cornford's commentary on the *Republic*. So the *Phaedo* myth was no part of David Bostock's commentary on the *Phaedo*. So Atlantis submerged beneath the pages of commentaries on the *Timaeus*.

When, in the course of time, scholars thought it might be important to give an account of the myths, the principle that myth is subordinate to opinion required them to give the full meaning of a myth in terms of the philosophical arguments of the dialogue in which it occurs. A recent collection of articles edited by Catalin Partenie (2009) is notable for the inclusion of many excellent articles that proceed in just this way. For example, G.R.F. Ferrari shows how the Myth of Er in the *Republic* is directed specifically at Glaucon, and how it is designed to appeal to specific ways that Glaucon thinks justice should be valued and praised. Or again, Gábor Betegh's careful analysis of the fable told at the beginning of the *Phaedo* suggests that it dramatises the structure of explanations of the sort Socrates prefers. These scholars provide careful and valuable analyses of the context of various myths. They have failed to appreciate, however, that when interpretation proceeds this way, we are not entitled to refer to these myths as Plato's. We are only entitled to refer, within the dialogue frame, to Socrates' Myth of Er, or to Socrates' fable about pleasure and pain. What Plato's purpose in presenting these myths is, or even whether he believes that they are myths in the same sense, remains completely hidden by the background assumption that myth is subordinate to the conversation of the dialogue.

³ To discuss this would take us far from our topic in this paper, but the issue is a serious one for scholars of Plato's myths and cannot be ignored. Plato's theology has often been associated with mystery religions and particularly Orphism. For discussion see Edmonds (2004). For Orphism generally, see Detienne (2003).

⁴ The classic work in this regard is Solmsen (1942). With this compare Festugiere's (1954) invaluable study. See also Merlan (1963) and Morgan (1992).

⁵ See for example *Apology*, *Euthyphro*, *Republic II*, *Laws II*.

IV. The legacy of Stewart's Plato in contemporary scholarship

It is far from obvious that we know yet what a Platonic myth is. Most Plato scholars do not offer any account of what myth is or means for Plato. We read without any hesitation about “the Myth of Er”, “the Atlantis myth”, “the *Timaeus* myth”, “the Myth of the Cave”, “the Myth of the Metals” and many other myths as though they were all the same sort of thing, as though we all understood what a myth is, and as though that understanding is the same as Plato's. Even a cursory glance at these Platonic myths, however, reveals what look like important differences: one is eschatological, one is historical, one has no supernatural elements whatsoever, one is a political analogy welded on to an independently existing cultural myth of autochthony. In contemporary accounts of Plato's myths there is no uniform principle for inclusion or exclusion.⁶

Gerard Naddaf points out that, “we all think we know what is meant by a myth” (Brisson, 1998:vii), but the problem is that our presumption may not provide a basis for what is meant by a myth in *Plato*. It is true that the term *muthos* in ancient Greek is the word from which we derive our term “myth”. It is because the terms are cognate, and because we have an implicit idea of what a myth is (for us), that we presume to understand what a myth is Plato. Yet like so many other terms, when we look closely at Plato's usage of *muthos* we quickly find ourselves in uncharted territory. While the dialogues sometimes use the term *muthos* for tales that overlap a modern idea of myth, the vast majority of occurrences do not fit at all. There are about one hundred uses of the term *muthos* in Plato (the exact number will vary depending on which dialogues are counted as genuinely Platonic and which variants of the *muth-* stem are counted). Of these, only a dozen or so actually refer to a tale presented in a dialogue. Only eight occurrences match with the tales usually identified as myths in Plato.

To take just one example of divergence from expectation, in the *Laws* the term *muthos* is frequently used to denote “preambles” (*proöima*) to articles of the Magnesian legal code.⁷ These preambles are rhetorical exhortations, by means of adumbrated rationales, to abide by the laws. They are meant to instruct, exhort, be memorable, and encapsulate some moral, but there seems little to indicate that any of them relates a myth in the ordinary English sense of the term.⁸ Accordingly, many scholars regard the term *muthos* as used of preambles to the laws, as simply having a special sense,

⁶ For a sample of widely different classifications of myth in Plato, compare: J.A. Stewart. *The Myths of Plato*, Catalin Partenie, ed. *Plato's Myths*, Luc Brisson, *Plato the Myth Maker*. Note that not only are different myths included or excluded, but even when these authors treat the same myths, they frequently do so on a different principle, describing what the myth is differently and setting its termini at different places.

⁷ There are fourteen such uses of *muthos*: 771c7, 773b4, 790c3, 804e4, 812a2, 840c1, 841c6, 865d5, 872e1, 887d2, 903b1, 913c2, 927c8, 944a2.

⁸ Brisson (1989:156–7) regards the preambles as referring implicitly to conventional Greek myths, but even he cannot find a conventional parallel for all of the cases.

distinct from Plato's usual use of the term elsewhere. But the exception proves the rule here — most of Plato's uses of *muthos* must be accorded a special sense.

Plato also uses terms other than *muthos* to denote stories that look like myths to us. For example, the story in the *Phaedrus* about Thoth (an Egyptian demigod) and his invention of writing is called an *akoê* (a heard thing), and the story in the *Politicus* about the age of Cronus, in which the universe, and time along with it, turned backwards, is called *phêêmê* (a saying). Other apparent myths are called *rheseis* (speeches) or *legomena* (legends) or *historiai* (narratives). Critias, in the *Timaeus* and *Critias* even insists on using the term *logos* for the Atlantis myth. Thus, Plato's use of the term *muthos* is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the identification of a myth, in the ordinary sense of the term. This presents those who would talk about Plato's myths with a problem of selection. Just what is to count as one of Plato's myths? Most scholars who write about Plato's myths do not tell us, and none have tried to uncover what a Platonic myth is in a systematic way.⁹ Partenie entertains briefly the question of what a Platonic myth is, but he shows no sign of being at an impasse. In a facile statement that echoes Stewart's distinction between myth and conversation he says simply that "once in a while the conversation is interrupted and then the pictures appear" (2009:13). This picture is false: as soon as we begin a Platonic dialogue, the pictures have begun, in the drama that unfolds before the reader.

I believe that Partenie's failure to recognise this is an indication of the effect of Schleiermacher and Stewart on subsequent scholarship. The sound Neoplatonic assumption that each dialogue as a whole is a Platonic myth is not open to them. Likewise, an opportunity to understand *how to understand* Plato's myths, one that no Neoplatonist discussed, is not open to them. Rather than trying to understand Platonic myth as separate to Platonic reasoning, we should be trying to understand the role of the dialogues themselves as framing myths. Partenie resists this approach — he calls it "radical" (2009:19) — but on his own terms, there is nothing to distinguish between a Platonic myth and a Platonic dialogue: "a Platonic myth," he says, "is a narrative that may serve as an 'embodiment' of abstract content" (2009:9). That is a neat description of Plato's dialogues.

V. Myth, history and poetry

There is a persistent tendency towards metaphysical allegory in Neoplatonism that we must be on our guard about. At the same time, the guard against allegorising the dialogues has been too careful. In wishing to avoid Neoplatonic obscurity and excess we have been misled in the other direction. The move to looking at Plato's dialogues

⁹ In a separate study, Harold Tarrant, Terry Roberts and I have attempted to identify a specific "myth style" in Plato, using computer analyses (2011). Our work is ongoing, but it has led to the identification of a signature that matches the major Platonic myths (e.g. those in Stewart [1960]). Interestingly, this signature appears much more widely in Plato, and suggests a far wider application of myth style than scholars have so far been willing to recognise.

themselves as *muthoi*, provides a more fruitful beginning for understanding what myth means to Plato than the attempt to use a preconceived notion of myth as non-philosophical fantasy. And there is evidence from within the dialogues that we should regard them as *muthoi*.

We might begin by reminding ourselves of the general sense of *muthos* for the Homeric Greeks. As Naddaf points out:

The basic meaning of the word *muthos* ... seems to have been 'something one says' ... The word *muthos* is never employed or associated, in Homer, in the unpopular and pejorative sense of a false or unbelievable story or fiction. (Brisson, 1998:vii)

When the pejorative sense does arise, we find it most pronounced in the historian Thucydides (I.21–22). The fundamental contrast in Thucydides is not between faith and reason but between history as transcription and the oral tradition associated with poetry and earlier forms of *historia*. The invention of writing made transcription possible, and with it the idea that an accurate verifiable record of fact could be recorded. As Naddaf remarks:

The oral tradition, the tradition based on memory, the one upon which Herodotus so much depended for the source of his *Histories*, is only worthy of contempt for the author of the *Peloponnesian War*. (Brisson, 1998:9)

Despite his role in the quarrel between philosophy and poetry, Plato is on the side of the poets. He never attempted to write philosophy in the manner of Thucydidean history.¹⁰ Nor did he try to replace poetry with philosophy, so much as to create a new form of philosophical poetry.¹¹ This much is confirmed in the *Laws*. There, shortly after the Athenian describes his own conversation with Cleinias and Megillus as “a kind of poem” (811c) and recommends that the young people of Magnesia should study such dialogues, he imagines how he might respond to itinerant poets who come to Magnesia seeking to perform their works. He says:

Respected visitors, we are ourselves authors of a tragedy, and that the finest and best we know how to make. In fact, our whole polity has been constructed as a dramatization of a noble and perfect life; that is what we hold to be in truth the most real of tragedies. Thus you are poets, and we also are poets in the same style, rival artists and rival actors, and that in the finest of all dramas ... (*Laws* VII.817a, trans. Taylor)

It bears considering, then, that the focal reference of *muthos*, for Plato, is essentially the same as it is for tragedy, namely the depiction of events in a way that brings out

¹⁰ There is some suggestion of the activity of transcription in the prologue of the *Theaetetus*, and perhaps in the prologues to the *Phaedo* and *Parmenides*, where first-hand accounts are sought, ostensibly for their greater accuracy. It is outside the scope of this paper to argue that Plato nevertheless did nothing like provide a transcript of these conversations (cf. *Letter II* 341c); let it suffice for now that the vast majority of Platonic dialogues clearly do not present themselves as containing the *ipsissima verba* of Socrates (or other speakers).

¹¹ See *Phaedo* 60d ff.; *Symposium* 223d.

the what-it-is-to-be of the action. Proceeding this way, we can gain some unexpected illumination from what Aristotle says about *muthos* in the *Poetics*.

VI. Aristotle's account of *muthos* in the *Poetics*

A *muthos* says Aristotle, is a *mimêsis* or representation of persons and actions (1450a 3–5). All kinds of stories are *mimêseis*. This includes not only “epic, tragedy, dithyramb, music for aulos and lyre” (1447a13–15), but also “the mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus and Socratic Dialogues” (1447b10–11). The function of *mimêsis*, according to Aristotle, is to promote understanding (*mathêsis*, 1448a7), and people acquire understanding through *mimêsis* when they work out what each thing represents (*sullogizdesthai ti hekaston*, 1448a16). Such understanding brings with it pleasure (*hêdonê*) that is distinct from and superior to pure aesthetic pleasure (1448b10–20). Thus the *muthos*, or “structure of events” (*he tôn pragmatôn sustasis*, 1450a5, 15) is “the most important part” (*megiston*, 1450a15) of *mimêsis*, because it contains “the greatest things by which the mind is led onwards” (*ta megista hois psuchagôgei*, 1450a33). Accordingly, *muthos* “is the first principle and, as it were, the soul of tragedy” (1450a38, trans. Halliwell), and tragedy is the most elevated (*spoudaion*) form of *mimêsis*.

A beautiful *muthos* should be like a beautiful animal (*zôion*, 1451a35), having its parts well ordered and having an appropriate magnitude. For that reason:

Just as ... in the other mimetic arts a unitary mimesis has a unitary object, so too the plot (*muthos*), since it is mimesis of an action, should be of a unitary and indeed whole action; and the component events should be so structured that if any is displaced or removed, the sense of the whole is disturbed and dislocated ... (1450a30–34, trans. Halliwell)

The structure of a *muthos* is therefore oriented entirely towards the universal (*ta katholou*, 1451b7). For the objects of understanding are not particulars. The particulars, which represent, are for the sake of the represented whole, and only those particulars that are essential for leading the mind to see the whole belong in the *muthos*. That is why *muthoi* are not historical. They are narratives that embody abstract content.¹²

If a *muthos* is to promote understanding of the universal, it is important that it does not focus on the particulars as such.¹³ It cannot be overly concerned with the exact details of particular occurrences. Rather, it must dwell on what is *likely*, in the sense of what, in the particulars that embody the whole, is most like the universal. Aristotle puts this point by saying that “it is not the poet’s function to relate actual events, but the kinds of things that might occur and are possible according to *the likely* (*to eikos*)

¹² Partenie, see n. 40 and associated text above. Note that this implies that if a Platonic dialogue is a *muthos*, the myths within cannot be separated from the rest of the conversation in the way suggested by most versions of the *mythos-logos* distinction, nor can they be reduced absolutely to *logoi*.

¹³ See Halliwell (1999:129 note a): “mimetic standards are irreducible to factual fidelity”. In a separate paper I have argued that the same holds for Plato (see Benitez, 2010).

and necessity” (1451a35–37 trans. Halliwell, alteration in italics). Throughout the *Poetics*, Aristotle stresses the need for *muthoi* to represent what is *likely* (to *eikos*).¹⁴ For him, a good *muthos* is an *eikôs muthos*.

VII. Aristotle’s account applied to Plato’s dialogues

All of these things that Aristotle says about *muthoi* can be found in Plato’s own dialogues, so it is tempting to infer that Aristotle’s aesthetic standards for *muthoi* were inherited from Plato. Indeed, most of what Aristotle says can be illustrated from the discussion of art and music found in two pages of Plato’s *Laws*. In his discussion of the criteria for good poetry in Book II, the Athenian Stranger claims:

- (a) that all poetry is likeness-oriented and mimetic (*eikastikên te ... kai mimêtikên*, 668a6),
- (b) that mimetic art is pleasing when it succeeds in producing likenesses (*eikastikai*, 667c9),
- (c) that *mimêsis* is useful because it results in learning (*mathêsis*, 667c5),
- (d) that pure aesthetic pleasure is distinct from the pleasure associated with learning (667d–e),
- (e) that the learning involves recognising what each thing is (668c4–5),
- (f) that this recognition involves grasping the being (*ousia, ti esti*) of what is represented; i.e. the universal (668c6–8), and
- (g) that *mimêsis* which does this is “most elevated” (*spoudaiotaton*, 667b7, 668b1).

It may be said that these comparisons show only that Plato’s aesthetic standards for poetic works closely match Aristotle’s account of the properties of *muthoi*. Yet it would be surprising if Plato did not bind himself to these standards when writing the dialogues. More direct evidence that the dialogues *do* adhere to the Aristotelian standards for *muthoi* can be found in a Plato’s comparisons of the dialogues to living beings, along the lines of Aristotle’s well ordered, appropriately sized animals.

Again we may start from Plato’s *Laws*. In Book VI, in drawing an analogy between law and painting, the Athenian treats paintings as *mimêseis* of living animals.¹⁵ In fact, he explicitly refers to paintings as *zoia*, eliding the difference between image and original. An artist, says the Athenian, should look after his *zoiôn* as a father looks after his child, focusing on its development, so that the child should become better rather than worse.¹⁶ He will even be concerned about providing for the child after he is gone, leaving behind a curator as guardian to set the child upright and clean him

¹⁴ See 1451a12, 1451a38, 1451b9, 1452a20, 1452a24, 1454a34, 1455b10, 1456a25, 1461b15.

¹⁵ The idea of treating artistic products as “children” is familiar in Plato; see *Symposium* 209c–d.

¹⁶ The metaphor “father of the speech” is familiar from Plato’s *Symposium* (177d).

off should he fall down.¹⁷ A little later the Athenian personifies the laws of Magnesia in the exactly this way, beseeching the Magnesians to look after them once he, Clinias and Megillus have departed, directing them to “praise and censure the laws ... receive them courteously, and live among them” (770e7–770a2). Understood in this light, the Athenian is recommending that works of both art and law, if they are to be treated seriously, should be regarded like living creatures, requiring the utmost care and love, with constant concern for development and improvement.

It is clear in many places that Plato intends his own dialogues to be compared to living beings in this way. On at least two occasions he explicitly makes such a comparison. At *Gorgias* 505c, as Socrates prepares to sum up the whole dialogue, he says to Callicles:

they say it is not right to leave even tales (*muthoi*) unfinished, but we should fit a head on them, that they may not go about headless. Give us the rest of the answers then, that our discussion may acquire a head. (trans. Woodhead)

And at *Laws* 752a, in connection with the whole discourse of the *Laws*, which is the establishment of a constitution for the new city of Magnesia, the Athenian says:

And, to be sure, since I am telling a tale (*muthos*), I should not like to leave it without its head; it would look monstrous ugly if it roamed at large in that condition. (trans. Taylor)

It is interesting moreover to note that both of these dialogues culminate in myths,¹⁸ in which case the final myth, like the most important part of the body, plays the role of the head, like Aristotle’s “first principle and soul of tragedy”. The genius of Plato was to endow his dialogues with a soul, like the statues of Daedalus.¹⁹ They are like living beings²⁰ — with a head, a body, and appendages — and, in most cases, personal names. Some are lovely at first sight, others have their beauty deep inside, but to see their form is to see them, as the Eleatic Stranger says in the *Sophist*, from the vantage point of the beautiful (*ek kalou*, 236b4), not from the perspective from which we first meet them.

This brings me to the last point of comparison of Platonic dialogues with Aristotelian myths. The relation of parent to offspring is often treated as analogous to the relation of original and image. Plato’s view of the relation of original and image is best expressed in the distinction between *fantastic arts* and *eikastic arts* employed in the *Sophist*.²¹ According to this distinction, all myth-making, as a form of image making, is, strictly speaking, inadequate. Some myths, however, involve distortion,

¹⁷ The concern for “orphaned” works is clear from *Protagoras* 347e, *Phaedrus* 275d, and *Theaetetus* 164e.

¹⁸ The *Laws*, it must be admitted, contains two books (XI–XII) that follow rather anticlimactically from the myth of book X. But there is reasonably good evidence that the last two books are additions of Philip of Opus.

¹⁹ See *Meno* 97d, where Socrates compares true opinions to the statues of Daedalus.

²⁰ See *Phaedrus* 276a–277a.

²¹ See *Sophist* 235d ff. For discussion of this distinction see Nightingale (2002), Speliotis (2007) and (2009), Leigh (2009).

and while they are pleasing to observe, they inevitably mislead the observers. These are mere fantasies. Others, by employing the right perspective and accurate proportions reveal the original to observers *through* the image. These are *eikastic* or genuine, realistic myths. Thus, the distinction is not merely aesthetic, since *eikastic* myths lead to knowledge and good, while *fantasies* lead to ignorance and evil.

VIII. Conclusion

There is significant evidence to warrant the view that for Plato any mimetic writing, including a Socratic dialogue, is a myth. We have seen that Plato's views about mimetic writing match closely those of Aristotle in the *Poetics*. On this view, the proper aim of a myth should be to depict serious thought and action in such a way that a spectator can recognise and learn the universal expressed in it. This view fits both the dialogues themselves and the myths within the dialogues. Indeed, it gives us a principle for distinguishing *Plato's* myths — images that are *eikastic* — from other, fantastic myths, like Protagoras' myth or Aristophanes' myth. Treating the Platonic dialogues themselves as myths turns the tables on the common view that myth is secondary to conversation in Plato. In fact it subordinates all the conversations to the overall "plot structure" and telos of the dialogue. This would provide motivation and evidence for reading the dialogues as philosophical literature rather than as philosophy dressed up in a literary form.

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