

Esoteric City: Theological Hermeneutics in Plato's *Republic**

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The other is speaking . . . of happy banqueters at a festival but not in a state, rather, he would be speaking of something other than a state.

– Plato, *Republic* 421a–b¹

The souls arriving all the time . . . departed gladly to the meadow and encamped there as at a festival.

– *Republic* 614e

When Plato's *Republic* criticises the poets and the 'imitative' arts, it begins with the critique of *mythic* poetry and derives its impetus from it, and so to understand the significance of this critique we must grasp the significance of myth itself. If we make this effort, we shall find that myth, in its relationship to the Gods and to mortals, is at the very heart of the *Republic*'s metaphysical concerns. Myth's value is not for entertainment or edification, but for salvation: 'And so, Glaucon, a myth was saved and not lost, and it will save us if we believe it' (*Republic* 621b). But how do we believe? And how are we thus saved?

Myth is a revelation that connects us to the Gods, but any connection also separates the things it connects. In particular, a literal reading of myths may lead us to a conception of the Gods inconsistent with the mode of being properly divine. We need an 'esoteric' reading of myth that looks to 'underlying meanings', *hyponoia*.

Representation, in turn, cannot be the sole or highest function of the arts, if it is the

* This essay was originally published in *Abraxas: International Journal of Esoteric Studies* 5 (2014), pp. 95-104. The pagination from this publication appears in brackets.

¹ Translations from the *Republic* (*Politeia*) are generally those of Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), though I have often modified them.

presence of the *symbol* that makes the arts divine. The imaginal City of the *Republic* is itself a symbol for the work of art, and the strictures applied to its citizens have at their heart the canons applied to myths, just as the Gods' cults lie at the centre of the City's public life. And the life of citizens beyond the City's walls, in the *festal* community of the city first described by Socrates and derided as a 'city of pigs' – evoked again in the dialogue's closing eschatological myth of Er, as seen in the quotations above – is a symbol of the Gods' existence beyond the confines of narrative. The activity of esoteric interpretation, in restoring our recognition of the Gods' integrity, thus symbolises the restoration of our own integrity, while to become a citizen of the esoteric City is to enter the work of art.²

The *Republic* is a key classical locus for the very notion of esoteric interpretation, on account of its explicit reference to *hyponoiai*, 'underlying meanings', possessed by the myths. The later Platonic tradition took up this practice, and so for instance in Proclus's commentary on the *Republic* we see the method applied to the mythic incidents Socrates refers to in the dialogue. Proclus explains that 'symbols [*symbola*] are not imitations of those things of which they are symbols', and thus 'If a poet is inspired and manifests by means of symbols' – literally 'tokens', *synthêmata*, a technical term in theurgy – 'the truth concerning beings, or if, using science, he reveals to us the very order of realities, this poet is neither an imitator, nor can be refuted by the arguments [in the [96] text].'³ So the mythic poet has access to a *science*; if we accept Proclus's argument that rescues the divinely inspired artist from mere representation, can we take the further step of determining a role for this science within the *Republic's* concerns?

² In the Platonic interpretation of the *Iliad*, the city of Ilios is the material (*hylikos*) site where the struggle over the status of embodied beauty is staged, and in this respect Homer's epic already suggests a symbolic identification of the City with the work of art. See Edward P. Butler, 'A Theological Exegesis of the *Iliad*, Book One', in *Essays on a Polytheistic Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Phaidra Editions, 2012).

³ *In Remp.* I 198.15–16, 20–4 Kroll.

Esotericism of the City: The City as *Synthêma*

This question concerns, in the first place, the symbolic value of the *Republic* itself. The *Republic* discusses the constitution of a city as an analogy of the soul, for Socrates proposes to analyse justice in the soul through an enquiry into justice in a city. The symbolic value for the soul of the ‘city in words’, however, is a different matter from the city as *analogy* of the soul.

In Plato’s account, it becomes clear that souls and cities mutually condition one another to the point that statecraft is as much the art of forming souls, and of forming a *soul*, as of forming a state, these activities being inseparable. Beyond this, the soul is a citizen in the cosmos – even the souls of other animals, which are also, like us, part of the cosmic animal discussed in the *Timaeus*, the dialogue following on the *Republic*’s heels. For what is an animal composed of animals (*Timaeus* 30c–d) but a polity? Such a ‘state’ can hardly, however, be assimilated without remainder to the political state, and indeed, there are likely to be points at which these ‘states’ come into conflict.⁴ Justice, as the discussion develops, turns out to be virtually synonymous with temperance (*sôphrosunê*). That is, justice is a harmony of faculties in the soul and in the state, not in isolation, but in their intimate linkage. Justice is the harmony of souls in the state and in the state of the soul, the harmony between the faculties or powers within it which come into expression and sometimes conflict as an animal develops. Temperance is the virtue of understanding the proportions proper to a unity born of and borne by mixture, and so

⁴ Aristotle, in his *Politics*, recognises that the unity of the *polis* described in the *Republic* is such that it is no longer a city at all, but an individual (1261a15–24). Rather than taking Aristotle’s criticism as destructive, I would argue that we may treat it as elucidating the very manner in which we ought to conceive the *Republic*’s city (cf. my remarks about the nature of *paradeigmata* in ‘Animal and Paradigm in Plato’, *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 18.2 (2014)).

evidently requires the ‘Promethean’ method taught in Plato’s *Philebus*, the art of understanding all beings as mixtures, or as we might say today, as *structures*. But units are mixtures insofar as they are *caused*, while insofar as they are *causes* themselves they have a different status.⁵

Citizens, too, therefore, are never *only* citizens, parts of the more or less healthy organism that is their city or state, even if they are scarcely conceivable in isolation from such wholes. Moreover, the citizen-soul as part of the polity’s mixture is inseparable from the mixture within the soul, from the soul itself as mixture. Plato elaborates a sophisticated psychopolitics in which different kinds of states arise from and foster certain states of the soul. Each type of soul and state has a particular relationship between whole and parts – a tyrant or a tyranny, an oligarch or an oligarchy, a democrat or a democracy – and there is no priority between state and soul in these fusions. It is not a matter of the state as a snapshot of its citizens’ souls at any given moment, or of the soul’s order being simply imposed by its environment. Rather, citizens’ souls are always being shaped by the dispositions of power within their city and the city is always being transformed by the conflicts within the psyches of its inhabitants. Nor are either of these states ever really stable, but are always in some process of transformation, as well as being subject to forces from outside. The organism is always in an environment, always defines itself relative to some exterior. Even the cosmic animal, which is [97] unique in relation to its paradigm (*Timaeus* 31a–b) and exhausts the matter available to it (32c–33a), has externalities beyond it, relativising it, as recognised and articulated by later Platonists.

To grasp this exterior, we need to begin from the city that is sketched by Socrates at the beginning of the dialogue and lies conceptually outside the City whose constitution

⁵ The Promethean method: *Philebus* 16c–17a; the addition of the notion of cause to the method: 26e–27c. I discuss the opposition of structuring causality and reified structure in Plato’s thought further in ‘Animal and Paradigm in Plato’.

he goes on to frame. Plato's brother Glaucon unsympathetically brands it a 'city of pigs' (372d) due to the simple, though happy, lifestyle of its citizens. Responding to Glaucon's demand to frame a polity that can produce luxuries for an elite, Socrates begins anew, fashioning a city that can survive under conditions he describes straightforwardly as unhealthy, indeed 'fevered' (372e). This city will accordingly belong no longer to pigs, but rather to hounds and sheep (422d). The sheep include both the producers and the leisure class for whom Glaucon was so keen to provide, while the hounds are the 'guardians' (*phylakes*) whose asceticism, together with the producers' labour, makes the elite's indulgence possible. Eventually, however, the discussion purges from the city its unproductive elite (399e), despite the fact that all the strictures of the guardians were conceived on their account. This dialectical performance can only be seen as first positing, then negating a certain teleology, or even as expressing the limits of teleology as such. The desire for a surplus beyond the basic needs of life has proven to be a heuristic mirage. The ideal city has transcended the illusions that conditioned its emergence. It has come into its own as a self-sustaining organism, not eternal, like the cosmic animal, however, but flourishing for a time before declining into the senescence of oligarchy.

Behind and within this political account, which is already stipulated to be also and even primarily a psychogony, there is a hidden infrastructure of theology and soteriology to be unearthed. Plato tips his hand at one point (469a) with respect to his guardians, who turn out to be none other than the guardian *daimones* of Hesiod's Golden Age, 'by the plans of great Zeus . . . guardians of mortal human beings' (*Works and Days* 122f). And these *daimones* are, in turn, clearly none other than those whom each soul, whether human or another animal, chooses when they select a 'paradigm' or pattern of life (617d), according to the *Republic's* closing discourse of Er, who died and returned to life. Between the account of the interval between lives and the account of the idealised state there are manifold parallels, and hence many threads available that can lead one safely

through Plato's labyrinth. Another example is the 'lots' (*klêrous*) that determine the order in which souls will choose their life-patterns, just like the lots governing the marriages of the guardians in the city (617d; 460a). These threads can, if pulled, loosen some of the knots that form in Plato's account if taken incorrectly.

Hence, it becomes clear that democracy is ontologically basic among the different state forms, despite representing a decline from the city of guardians, for in the democratic state, in any event, 'one is not at a loss for paradigms [*paradeigmata*]' (557d–e), and the democratic soul 'contain[s] within himself the greatest number of paradigms' (561e). The democratic state, therefore, for all its shortcomings, expresses most transparently the 'meadow' in which the souls of all animals choose their life-patterns and form a lifetime bond, a marriage of sorts, with the [98] *daimôn* who shall be 'the guardian of his life and the fulfiller of his choice' (620e). The soul in the meadow and the citizen in the democracy share the common task of framing for themselves an imaginal citizenship in a polity in words, a city that is a 'paradigm laid up in heaven' (592a–b).

Esotericism in the City: Exegesis and the Soul

Within Plato's construct of the most fully ordered condition of the state and/or the soul, since it is a portrait, at least from a certain perspective – portraits always being perspectival (598a–b) – of the cosmos as a whole, we can expect to find the Gods. Already in the 'city of pigs', people 'sing hymns to the Gods' (372b), and the city of guardians, likewise, should 'admit no poetry . . . save only hymns to the Gods and the praises of good men' (607a).

Socrates considers the *logoi* concerning the Gods – the elements, as it were, of theology – through promulgating certain critical 'guidelines' (*typoi*) for compositions involving the Gods. These canons can be reduced to the single maxim expressed at 381c,

that 'each God is the most beautiful and the best thing possible'. This maxim, a key early statement of the doctrine I have characterised as polycentric polytheism, is at odds with a central characteristic of narrative, and of the state as well. In this context it is indeed perhaps important to speak of the state, rather than the city, because these do have a divergent trajectory in the history of thought. Whereas the city lets its wholeness be conceived as nowhere other than in each singular perspective on it, and invites therefore a polycentric conception, the state aims at the monocentric codification of sovereignty. This ambivalence has its ontologically primary expression, I would argue, in the problem of narratives about the Gods. We see this in particular at 379c–380c, where it is affirmed that in the guardians' city, speakers and poets will have to affirm that the Gods are not causes of *all things*, but only of *goods*. As a result, the Gods will actually have to be regarded as the cause of *few things*. This reasoning, however, which infers directly from the idea of the Good to the activities of the Gods, would strike at the heart of the Socratic project, enunciated in the *Phaedo* (97c ff.), to understand *all things* according to the Good.

There is a clash here, apparently, between a wide and a narrow conception of the Good, and corresponding to it a wide and narrow conception of the Gods' causality. According to the wide view, the Gods must be regarded as the cause of all things, and all things therefore as somehow of the good or from the good, while according to the narrow view, subsidiary causes must be assigned to those things that are not unequivocally good. Narrow goodness renders mythic narrative both necessary and problematic. The world's complex causality requires the conflict of diverse goodnesses: myth supplies this in conflicts among Gods, heroes and mortals, but also already in the notion of a division of labour among the Gods. The mythic narrative is thus theologically problematic in that it tends to make the Gods appear limited, partial and passive. But this is the very problem of the City of the Gods, of the sovereignty exercised by one such as

Zeus in a heavenly state such as Olympos. Olympos is not a place, but a regime. Zeus's problem is to establish a division of labour, of 'honours', *timai*, a term used persistently in Hesiod's *Theogony* and echoed by Plato when speaking of the articulated [99] functions within the state (for instance, at 434a). The Gods in mythic narrative, like the citizens in the state, cede their autarchy, and in a sense therefore their individual integrity, to a common whole, a common work (though humans, unlike the Gods, do so primarily out of need, out of an impossibility of autarchy for them (369b)). Mortal souls recover their integrity, such as it is, on the festal meadow upon which they must choose their *paradeigmata*, their life-patterns. Only by briefly recovering in the meadow their individual wholeness can souls, in a moment as free as they can experience, express what they truly find beautiful, what they truly want.

The Gods, on the other hand, recover their wholeness or autarchy from within the problematic justice of the narrative 'state' through the art of *esoteric exegesis*. In the city of guardians as framed by Socrates, the place of exegete is held by Delphic Apollo, 'who, seated at the centre and upon the navel of the earth, delivers his interpretation' (427c). As regards 'the institution of temples and rites and other cultus of the Gods, daimons and heroes', which are 'the greatest, the most beautiful and the first of institutions', of these there is no science, but they will come from the Gods themselves, and will thus be internal to pantheons: 'if we are wise we shall . . . make use of no other exegete than our hereditary [God]' (427b–c). We learn from Plato's *Laws* that 'hereditary' has no distinctly genealogical force here, for there the colonists founding a new city in a land already inhabited are urged to preserve the cults instituted by the natives, and 'render them the same honours as did the ancients' (*Laws* 848d), alongside the Olympian cults the colonists have introduced, though these ancient cults are in no literal sense

‘ancestral’ for the colonists.⁶ What matters is the role accorded to institution (*nomothesis*) as complementary to science (*epistêmê*).

There is accordingly an ambiguity regarding exegesis, which is on the one hand internal to a tradition, but also belongs to philosophy, which bridges traditions. In the *Laws*, all references to ‘exegetes’ posit their activities as internal to the Hellenic theology (759c, 775a, 828b). In the *Republic* passage, Apollo’s role as exegete is ‘hereditary’ for Hellenes, but Socrates also says that Apollo is ‘for all humanity the interpreter of [their] hereditary [religion]’ (427c). Plato is hardly ignorant that other nations have their own theologies and exegetical practices internal to them. Rather, he seems to assert a special role for Apollo here as a patron of *philosophy*, though not in the same sense as Zeus, the patron of the philosopher in the *Phaedrus* (252e–253a). Among the abundant references to Apollo in Plato’s works, most telling perhaps is the etymology offered for his name in the *Cratylus* (404e–406a), where Apollo is at once the one causing a manifold to ‘move together’ (*homopolôn*) in harmony, and the one who is ‘simple’ (*haplous*), that is, rather than complex or heterogeneous. The relationship between harmony in a manifold and the integrity of a unit, whether the city-state or the individual soul, is the very theme of the *Republic*. A God like Apollo has a role internal to his pantheon and also a role mediating between that tradition and certain universal – i.e., empty formal – epistemic practices; and we can expect that Gods with similar patterns of activity in other pantheons will play similar roles empowering the ‘translational’ practices of philosophy or equivalent discourses.

Esoteric exegesis falls under this second of the exegete’s roles, that which has to do not with [100] instituting cults and rituals, but rather with a kind of critique. The esoteric interpretation of myth is a critique of mythic narrative on behalf of the integrity

⁶ Translations from the *Laws* are by R. G. Bury (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), sometimes modified.

of each God in the polycentric manifold; its goal is to recover the sense of each deity as the wider good.⁷ The goal of such exegesis is not rationalistic ‘demythologisation’, because myth is cosmogonic. In the *Republic*, the cosmos is the ‘state’ formed by the mythic division of *timai* among the Gods, which parallels the organisation of the polity. In accord with the analogy governing the entire dialogue, esoteric exegesis, as the path to integrity for the Gods in the mythic narrative, is a path to integrity for the mortal soul as well. In so far as we can restore to each God his/her integrity – her *total* causality – we shall also restore wholeness and providential arrangement to the cosmos, in which everything is disposed somehow on account of the Good. In this manner we shall find our way from the condition of a tripartite soul, with its conflicting faculties carefully harmonised, to the singularity entailed in our choice of a life-pattern.⁸ This choice, like the direct narration of the dithyrambic poet (394b–c), expresses our singular experience of beauty, according to which we choose not just a paradigm for our life alone, but necessarily a paradigm for the cosmos as well, because everything else adjusts itself to our choice. The wholeness of the cosmos is present in each of those souls, not in a totalising paradigm-of-paradigms belonging to a different order, because the paradigm of the cosmos as a whole is simply Animality, according to the *Timaeus*, and the order possessed by the All is thus simply the order things have as a result of the desires and choices of animals.⁹

⁷ I have discussed some of the methods of this exegesis in ‘The Theological Interpretation of Myth’, *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 7.1 (2005), 27–41, republished in *Essays on a Polytheistic Philosophy of Religion*.

⁸ Compare the interpretation of unitary personhood in Plato as an ‘achievement’ rather than an ‘endowment’ in Lloyd P. Gerson, *Knowing Persons: A Study in Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), with specific reference to tripartition (chapter 3), and a similar view in Mary Margaret McCabe, *Plato’s Individuals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) that ‘being a unified person is for Plato . . . not something I can take for granted . . . but rather something to which I aspire’ (p. 264).

⁹ On the relation between the personal paradigm and the cosmic paradigm, see further the aforementioned ‘Animal and Paradigm in Plato’.

In this respect the philosophical cosmogony in the *Timaeus* can on no account be understood in isolation from the role of paradigms throughout the *Republic*, culminating in the life-patterns chosen by souls in the festal meadow in Er's account. I have remarked above that the abundance of paradigms available in the democratic state (557d–e, 561e) shows that for all its flaws the democratic state is ontologically basic in its homology with the eschatological meadow on which the choices of paradigms are laid. But the notorious critique of art as representation or 'imitation' (*mimêsis*) is also undercut decisively by Socrates's recourse to the painter (472d) who, 'having sketched a paradigm, say of the most beautiful person', cannot reasonably be asked 'to demonstrate that such a man could also possibly come to be'. The arts, as *representing* reality, cut a poor figure for Plato, since their proper role lies in *forming* it, providing it with paradigms, a role lying on a plane superior not only to the state but to so-called 'forms' as well, if by the latter we mean things akin to higher-order analogues of plans for manufactured items (596b). The *true* forms, rather, are those things around which crystallise the experiences of beauty that lend integrity to animal units. In this we see the subordination of eidetics to henology in genuine Platonism. Formal unity, Socrates says, is due either to a God's will (*boulêsis*) or to 'some necessity' (*tis anankê*) (597c). It is due to necessity if we understand formal unity as simply given by the power of definition – this is the lower sense of 'form', which Plato appropriately exemplifies by an artefact, while form in the higher sense, as in the paradigms of lives, does not subordinate particulars to a universal. This higher formal unity is due to will, the choice of a whole cosmos by a whole, integral individual. This [101] is the highest plane of formalisation, in the *Republic* as in the *Timaeus* (31a), and both thus accord with the remarks in the *Phaedrus* (250b–d) regarding the pre-eminence of Beauty as a kind of transcendental.

The *Timaeus* tells us that the paradigm of the cosmos, Animality, is the paradigm because it is 'the most beautiful intelligible' (30d), and that the paradigm cannot thus be a

part (30c). This is just where the arts fail. Homer is not paradigmatic on account of any of the parts of his creation, but only on account of the *whole*. For instance, he is not master of any of the arts portrayed in his works (*Republic* 599b ff.), because these representations are merely dependent moments of a whole. The danger of narrative is precisely this, that it can foster our passivity (*pathêma*, 602d), that is, the sense in which we are part of a whole, rather than whole ourselves. This applies even to being part of such a noble whole as a ‘well-ordered polity’ (619c–d). Perhaps the paradigmatic moment, so to speak, to illustrate the danger of this peculiarly narrative passivity is the deceptive theophany (381d–e), for a theophany involving mere appearance can only be the appearance of theophany, inviting the reduction of the Gods’ manifestations to psychological events, and hence the subordination of the Gods to mere parts of the whole formed by our experience – a psychologistic ‘subreption’, to borrow a Kantian term.

The countervailing quality that we seek to bring out in myths is effectively *musical*, for as Plato says, music has non-epistemic virtues that are ‘siblings’ (*adelphai*) to those found in narrative, both mythic or fabulous (*mythôdeis*) narrative and the ‘more realistic’ (as I would read *alêthinôteroi* here) (522a), and thus prior to this distinction between, as it were, ‘fiction’ and ‘non-fiction’. Though enigmatic, the passage points nevertheless to what must be ‘saved’ in the myth: a direct causal force that can only be impeded by literalism, for literal interpretation opposes the myth to truth, whereas the virtue inherent in narrative cuts across the divide between the ‘fabulous’ and the ‘truthful’. Similarly, the city of guardians divides the world into, e.g., Hellenes and barbarians (470c), which Plato uses at *Statesman* 262d as an example of a faulty division of things, another being the division into ‘humans’ and all other animals.¹⁰ Narrative may

¹⁰ Compare the notorious equivocation in the *Timaeus* (90e–92c) between the original, paradigmatic ‘humanity’ and the human species, which is merely one of many animal

not be a form of knowledge, despite the existence of a 'science' of symbols; but our reception of its para-epistemic virtue can be thwarted by a pseudo-knowledge that polemicalises narrative, pitting truth and fantasy against one another. Myth is neither literal nor allegorical nor psychological, but simply *musically* causal and ontological.

The essential incompleteness of the narrative whole, its inability to exhaustively determine its parts, is inscribed in the city of the guardians itself. This city is a contradiction, framed as a 'fevered' city requiring total mobilisation to secure and defend a surplus to be consumed by an unproductive elite. This elite, however, is purged from the city as it is being formulated, which thus eliminates its own reason for being. Within the artistic whole of the 'city in words', this class of pure consumers is the figure – but a faulty one – of the 'user', who is introduced at 601c–d as superior to the 'maker' and the 'imitator' alike. By subordinating the maker, the demiurge, Plato decisively anticipates – and renders unnecessary – the similar move associated with the 'Gnostic' movement. The 'user' transcends the paradigm she chooses just by virtue of choosing [102] it, but in doing so she is implicated as a part in the whole she has adopted. When the consumer class is eliminated, however, where is the 'user' to be found in Plato's portrait of the world, but in those who 'run about to all the Dionysiac festivals' and who are in a way 'similar to philosophers' (475e)? These bacchantes are the only true worldly expression of the pure user, the consumer of appearance itself. Accordingly, they are the structural counterparts of the Apollonian exegete, hermeneutics and the revel being the two roads from the state to the festal city.

If, in eliminating the condition that called for its positing, the city of the guardians has not purged itself of a mere contingency, then it has proven itself possible *only* as a 'city in words', as a paradigm envisioned from within the plenitude of

species declined from a generic animality. There is thus a wider and a narrower sense of 'human' corresponding to the wider and narrower 'goodness', on which again see my 'Animal and Paradigm in Plato'.

paradigms available in the democratic state, a city of which one may only be a phantasmal citizen (592a–b). The city in words, the city of imagination, plays no genuinely political function except insofar as there is inherent political value in an imaginal citizenship, a passport for the soul proving that the soul is not native in its divided state, its tripartition into consuming, spirited and rational parts. This in turn forms the basis for an art of not being governed in just this way or that, as Foucault defined ‘critique’. The proper place of the guardian city lies in the emergence of soul, the psychological city, but that role cannot be representational, fostering imitations; it must be symbolic and musical.¹¹ Indeed, if the guardian city is nothing other than a symbol for the function of imaginal citizenship, it would be senseless to attempt to institute the city of guardians on the physical plane, for every city is already the city of guardians.

The condition of the soul, in passing from the city of pigs, which is the form of the shared life as such but constitutes only the weakest civic unity, to the city of guardians, the city of hounds and sheep, the beehive city (520b), a city that is ‘truly *one*’, that ‘consents to be a unity’ in itself (423a–b) and is hence its own organism, becomes *mysterious*: the soul is necessarily a *mystês*, one undergoing initiation, in it. Myths with *hyponoiai*, ‘deep meanings’ that conflict with their superficial sense – and let us be clear, this can only mean *all* myths – can only be shared, in the guardian city, with ‘a very small audience . . . under a pledge of secrecy and after sacrificing not a pig’ – the sacrifice at Eleusis – ‘but some huge and unprocurable victim’ (378a). Instead of a pig, the sacrifice demanded is a citizen of the city of pigs, the surrender of the wholeness of the festal subject. The city of pigs knows no ‘barbarians’, it does not subjugate anyone or treat

¹¹ Note the ‘guardian’ class of deities on the intellectual plane in the *Platonic Theology* of Proclus, exemplified by the Hellenic Kouretes (book V chaps. 33–5 and 121–31 in Saffrey and Westerink).

anything as a mere resource; but the city of the guardians has an outside, beyond its walls, just as ‘forms’ have their ‘matter’, in the war of formation, as Proclus describes it.¹²

We see this struggle reflected as well, surprisingly, in some of Socrates’s remarks about mathematics, which it turns out is not such a placid study: ‘the study for which we are seeking must have this additional qualification . . . [t]hat it be not useless to soldiers’ (521d). With the proper training, these guardians will not be as ‘irrational lines’ (534d) in the state. In the *Laws*, the Hellenes’ lack of attention to the issue of irrational number, that is, of incommensurability, renders them ‘pigs rather than human beings’ (*Laws* 819d). The mathematics of irrational number and of incommensurables may be taken ‘esoterically’ as a symbol for the esoteric hermeneutics lying secretly at the heart of the city of guardians, veiled [103] by the divided line, veiled by the *Republic*’s seemingly closed economy of ascent and descent.¹³ For the citizens of the city of words *are* on a deeper level ‘irrational lines’, ‘incommensurable’ despite the ‘noble lie’ of autochthony, just as the souls in the netherworld meadow can make no choice pure of their own histories. The thesis that Plato deliberately incorporates irrational numbers as primitive building blocks in the *Timaeus* cosmogony accords well with what is suggested by these passages in the *Republic* and the *Laws*.¹⁴ But Plato was not merely ‘Pythagorising’, for he recognised the limitations of mathematics narrowly construed, treated as the lesser arithmetic in the *Philebus* (56d–e), in that it abstracts from the differences between

¹² Proclus speaks of the ‘war’ in which ‘things that come to be in a foreign place’ at one time ‘by introducing the universal, by means of form dominate the natural substrate’, while at another time ‘withdrawing to the particular . . . partake of divisibility, weakness . . . and division’ (*Platonic Theology* I 18.86.5–9). This polemical formation is the key, in particular, to the Platonic exegesis of the *Iliad*, as noted above.

¹³ One might profitably compare the position of the city of guardians relative to its externalities to that of Euclidean geometry within an implicit non-Euclidean context, as discussed in Vittorio Hösle, ‘Plato’s Foundation of the Euclidean Character of Geometry’, pp. 161–182 in Dmitri Nikulin, ed., *The Other Plato: The Tübingen Interpretation of Plato’s Inner-Academic Teachings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

¹⁴ On this thesis, see Denis O’Brien, *Theories of Weight in the Ancient World*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1984), pp. 345–9.

different kinds of unit, whereas the 'philosopher's arithmetic' will take into account incommensurability, not merely of the sort geometers discovered, but the radical existential incommensurability of which that is the symbol. Like the mythic narrative, the whole cannot synoptically render its parts; the city proves, ultimately, to be nothing other than its perspectives, or rather is itself the hermeneutical or exegetical process by which each makes its mutability and complexity peculiarly her own.

If, as Cicero says, Socrates paints his polity for us 'not as possibly existing, but as making it possible that the principle of political things be seen' (*De re publica* 2.52), then I wish to argue that that principle is primarily hermeneutical. The Socratic construction is neither 'utopian' nor 'anti-utopian', neither possible nor impossible, because it is not a plan but a paradigm, with the mode of being appropriate to *paradeigmata*. As such, the city is not potential but real, but it exists in the labour of interpretation of its citizens, because paradigms, in Plato's sense, exist in being appropriated by individuals in a peculiar, daimonic fashion. A paradigm, once chosen, comes to life, becomes a daimon. This is how it is explained in the eschatological account of Er, which tells how mortal beings choose the *paradeigmata* of the lives they are about to live, and which provides the key for understanding the paradigm of the city that has come before. This city will not come to be through imagining it as it is described, as though it is a representation, but rather through the procedure that is specifically denied to its guardians, namely interpretative work upon myth. This work, guided and guarded by the true principles concerning the Gods, makes it possible for the myths to take soul and ensoul the polity. The city, in turn, is ensouled through its citizens seeking their justice, which ultimately is a unique meaning for one's life, in which fashion the labour of hermeneutics becomes continuous with operative theurgy. Citizenship in this way acquires a special sense which involves the citizen's freedom from any determined role in the social order.