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Critical Notice

Literary Form and Philosophical Discourse: The Problem of Myth in the Platonic Dialogues

A discussion of: Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, Francisco J. Gonzalez (eds.), *Plato and Myth: Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths. Mnemosyne. Supplements, 337*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012. Pp. Viii + 476. ISBN 9789004218666. $222.00 (HB).

The present volume is the result of a conference held at the University of Ottawa in May 2008. The book falls into two parts, preceded by the editors' introduction and followed by a list of references and a very useful *index locorum*. The first part is devoted to general questions concerning the nature, function, main characteristics of myths in Platonic dialogues, their relationships with allegories and images, their status from the perspective of Platonic writing, and their reception in Neoplatonic interpretations. It consists of six chapters written by Glenn Most, Monique Dixsaut, Harold Tarrant, G. R. F. Ferrari, Catherine Collobert, and Pierre Destrée.

The second part is devoted to the analysis of specific myths. In chapters seven and eight respectively, Claude Calame and Gerd Van Riel analyze the myth of Prometheus in the *Protagoras*. The following five chapters are devoted to myths of judgment in the afterlife: Radcliffe Edmonds and Christopher Rowe deal with the final myth in the *Gorgias*; Elizabeth Pender explores the correspondence between the different parts of the underworld geography in the final myth of the *Phaedo* and the cognitive and moral conditions of the souls dwelling in each part of that landscape; chapters twelve (by Annie Larivée) and thirteen (by Francisco Gonzalez) analyze the myth of Er in the *Republic*. In the following two chapters Christopher Moore and Franco Trabattoni approach from different perspectives the myth of Theuth in the *Phaedrus*. In chapter sixteen, Kathryn Morgan focuses on theriomorphism in the mythical presentations of the soul. According to Morgan, the image of Typhon in *Phdr*. 230a3-6, that of the chariot team in the Palinode, and the mixture of animal and human nature in the strange creature described at *Resp*. IX 588c2-10, show Plato's awareness of how language fails to capture the soul's nature and its embodiment. Chapter seventeen (by Elsa Grasso) and eighteen (by Luc Brisson) are devoted to the *eikos muthos* of the *Timaeus*,

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while in chapter nineteen Christoph Horn aims to show that the myth of the *Statesman* is a 'doctrinal myth', which presents in narrative fashion important elements of Plato's theology. The final chapter, written by Louis-André Dorion, brings us back to the beginning. In chapter one Glenn Most proposes eight criteria for determining which parts of Plato's texts are myths; Dorion, by applying those criteria to the story of the oracle of Delphi in the *Apology*, argues that it is not only a fictitious account, but also a myth.

Let me say from the outset that this imposing volume constitutes an excellent addition to the numerous treatments of the role of myth in Plato's dialogues. Most papers are strong pieces of scholarship, deal with fundamental questions, and offer interesting textual analysis. Yet, as is often the case with conference proceedings, more cross-referencing and discussion within chapters would have been welcome, since the different authors hold positions that are often at odds with each other, but rarely comment on their disagreements.

Let me single out Glenn Most's contribution as an example. The author suggests that the eight criteria he proposes are not meant to be uncontroversial and that they admit of exceptions (p. 16). The approach is interesting insofar as Most does not limit himself either to considerations of form (as in criterion 1: 'Platonic myths are almost always monological'), or of content (as in criterion 4: 'Platonic myths always deal with objects and events that cannot be verified'). Instead, he also includes the 'concrete conditions of the communicative situations of the speakers and their listeners' (p. 15). So, for example, criterion 2 reads: 'Platonic myths are probably always recounted by an older speaker to younger listeners'. The author maintains that 'the only possible exception is Aristophanes' myth in the *Symposium*' (p. 16), but does not consider this a significant counter-example because, at the dramatic date of the dialogue, Aristophanes would have been already 44 years old, and 'a brilliant comic poet might well have sought a particular comic effect by permitting himself to pretend to be older than he really was' (pp. 16-17).

However, criterion 2 seems to be contradicted by Destrée when he acutely observes that Glaucon, at *Resp.* 359b-c, introduces his tale by announcing that he is composing a myth, 'or more precisely re-composing a *muthos* by allegedly reporting what some (unnamed) *mythologoi* have said (359d)' (p. 113). The story told by the young Glaucon to the older Socrates in book II of the *Republic*, of which Destrée offers an insightful analysis, is considered a myth also by Dixsaut (p. 39), Collobert (p. 100), and Larivée (p. 252). One is left wondering whether Most's thesis that myths are told by older people to younger people in the Platonic dialogues was challenged by the scholars attending the conference in Ottawa. It would certainly have been interesting to find the issue discussed in the book.

A similar problem can be detected with respect to criterion 5: 'Platonic myths generally derive their authority not from the speakers' personal experience but

from the tradition'. Most here fails to consider the difference between Greek myths belonging to the oral tradition and the creative transformations that those myths undergo when they become material for Plato's writing. Criterion 5 would not be problematic with respect to Plato only if we took it to mean something fairly trivial, i.e., that most of the time characters who tell myths in the dialogues claim to have heard them from someone else (in the near or distant past). Appeal to tradition, however, is not necessarily what gives a Platonic myth its authority, especially when Plato has his characters tell stories that elaborate on previously known mythical examples. This point is clearly stated by Horn: 'what is characteristic of the *Statesman* myth is its free use of the narrative material, not the recourse to what is authoritative, self-evident, or generally shared' (p. 400; cf. note 10 in the same page). Trabattoni makes an analogous point concerning *Phdr*., 275b5-c2. In that passage, Socrates is answering Phaedrus' charge that he makes up stories from Egypt or from wherever he likes (275b3-4). As Trabattoni observes, according to Socrates 'the reason the priests of Dodona pay attention to the words of the oak is not simply that they are certain it is the spokesman of Zeus. But they listen to its words "provided only that they said what was true" [...]. What follows from this is that the only condition capable of lending authority to a *logos* is the truthfulness of the content it expresses' (p. 307). From this observation one might conclude that Socrates himself would wish Phaedrus not to yield to the authority of the myths he has been listening to in the course of the dialogue. Rather, Phaedrus (and by extension we, the readers) should lend those myths authority only if, after close examination, they turn out to exhibit some truth (and the difficulty, of course, is: what does it mean for a myth to exhibit some truth?).

A further potentially controversial point in the list of criteria compiled by Most (and not discussed in the course of the book) is number 7: 'Platonic myths are never structured as dialectic but instead always as description or narration'. With respect to this point, Most explains that 'the Platonic myths are structured either synchronically as the description of the coexisting parts of a place (so in the *Phaedo, Gorgias*, and *Republic*) or, more often, diachronically as the narration of successive episodes of one or more larger actions (so in the *Protagoras*, in the myth of writing in the *Phaedrus*, in the *Symposium*, in the myth of Atlantis in the *Timaeus* and in the *Laws*)' (p. 18). My concern here is with the 'either/or' formulation. The final myth of the *Gorgias*, for example, does not simply describe judgment after death, but also narrates the transformation to which final judgments were subjected when the Age of Chronos was followed by the Age of Zeus. This is not a minor point. As I had occasion to argue,[1] Socrates intends to suggest, by

[1] A. Fussi, "The Myth of the Last Judgment in the *Gorgias*," *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 54, No. 3, Mar., 2001, pp. 529-552.

this most interesting diachronic mythical narration, that his interlocutors speak to each other and judge each other as if they were still the members of the age of Chronos: they rely on external appearance and on the quantity and prestige of the witnesses who happen to agree with them; they are not open to what might be unexpected, but, rather, treat conversation as a rhetorical exercise in which one knows in advance how to answer all questions. Conversely, the age of Zeus presents some fundamental traits of Socrates's own dialogic revolution: the openness to the unexpected implied by the search for truth about the soul, a more authentic mode to relate to others, and the ultimate fallibility of judgment echo Socrates' philosophical alternative to the rhetorical attitude exemplified by Gorgias and Polus in the dialogue. Some of these points are also noticed by Edmonds and Rowe, who, in the present volume, consider the narration of the final myth of the *Gorgias* as significantly linked to the interaction of the characters within the dialogue as a whole. Unfortunately, neither Edmonds nor Rowe question Most's thesis that myths either describe parts of a place or narrate subsequent events.

It is somewhat misleading to call the characteristics identified by Most a list of 'criteria' for identifying myths in the Platonic dialogues. This empirical collection of data does not apply well to certain myths, and, by admission of the author himself, does not aspire to be complete.

One significant exception to the paucity of cross-referencing within the book is found in Dorion's essay, which, in order to prove that the famous story of the Delphic oracle is a myth, refers readers back to Most's contribution and employs his list of criteria in a normative fashion. Yet, because of the fundamental difference between a definition of a myth and a mere list of properties that happen to be shared by some myths some of the time, there is no special reason to believe that the properties listed by Most *ought* to be shared by all myths, or that they could allow us to demonstrate that certain stories are in fact myths.[2]

Dorion's application of Most's criteria is problematic, and, in certain instances, it appears to be based on equivocation. Let us consider criterion 1 ('Platonic myths are almost always monological'). In the *Apology* we find Socrates addressing a crowd of jurors, not holding a casual conversation with a small number of individuals, as is usually the case. The relevant literary genre here would be forensic rhetoric, not the Socratic dialogue. That Socrates' listeners in the *Apology* do not interrupt him when he recounts the story of the Delphic oracle can hardly be proof that what he tells is a myth, even if when he tells myths in other dialogues his interlocutors do not interrupt him (this does not imply that we should not

[2] Here I agree with Christian Schäfer, who reviewed this volume for *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (http://www.bmcreview.org/2012/11/20121103.html).

consider carefully when and how Socrates is being interrupted by his noisy audience in the *Apology*). As to the second criterion (myths are told by older people to younger people) Dorion finds that it is satisfied by Socrates' story in the *Apology* because at the time of the trial Socrates is seventy years old and most listeners are certainly younger. The problem is one of adherence to Plato's stylistic indications. If in a dialogue we find an old person speaking to one or more interlocutors whose relative youth is stressed (as in the *Phaedo*), we are entitled to consider youth a relevant factor. If the same old person is portrayed when addressing a mostly undifferentiated crowd of jurors, our inferences concerning the age of the group of listeners cannot bear the same weight as if they had been invited by the text. If the seventy-year-old Socrates had been speaking to a group of athletes in a gymnasium the point would have been stronger.[3] Dorion helps us identify several fictitious aspects of Socrates' story, and he very interestingly shows how unreliable and unverifiable it appears to be upon close examination. However, he does not prove conclusively that the story is indeed a myth.

One could read this collection as an interesting survey of the typical alternatives that follow from different interpretations of Plato's philosophy in general and of the relationship between literary form and philosophical content in particular. In the following observations I would like to highlight a few differences in the interpretative strategies adopted by the contributors to this volume.

Trabattoni holds that dialectical argument and myth complement each other because the former leads us from the world of becoming to the metaphysical otherness of ideas, but 'it falls upon the latter, and no longer dialectics, to describe this supra-celestial place, whose existence had been established by dialectics itself' (p. 315). The function of myth is thus to give a positive characterization of metaphysical objects (ideas, the immortal and immaterial soul) or situations (the condition of humanity before history, the judgment after death) which are beyond the temporal and physical conditions of ordinary life. On the other hand, Brisson argues that the myth in the *Timaeus* is called an *eikos muthos*, not because it deals with metaphysical entities (ideas), but precisely because it deals with the sensible world, i.e. with images: 'Since Timaeus is talking about the sensible world, which is a mere image of genuine reality, intelligible reality, his myth and his explanation cannot achieve a stable truth, whose object is reality, and they must be content with the likeness (*eikos*), whose truth can be shaken by persuasion' (pp. 390-391). So, while Trabattoni and Brisson agree that *logos* and *muthos* complement each other, they differ on the role *logos* is supposed to play. For Trabattoni

[3] When at *Gorg*., 521e, Socrates says of his trial: 'I shall be like a doctor tried by a bench of children on a charge brought up by a cook,' he is not complaining about the actual age of the jurors, but about their lack of judgment and their silly expectations of life.

logos gives way to *muthos* when the object is metaphysical reality, or when the situation described is beyond experience (as is the case with the origin of the world); Brisson agrees that the story of the *Timaeus* 'is a myth situated upstream of error and of truth, because nobody was there at the time' (p. 375). Yet he maintains that *logos* can satisfactorily address intelligible reality ('intelligible forms are known by the intellect and are the objects of science', p. 373), while the myth in the *Timaeus* is merely likely (*eikos*) because it addresses the sensible world, which is only an image of true reality.

It is debatable whether in the Platonic dialogues myths are pieces of writing directed at unprofessional audiences (as for Most, who embraces the distinction between exoteric writings and esoteric teaching), or whether they can best be understood as rhetorical invitations to particular interlocutors in specific dialogic situations (as for Calame and Moore). For Dixsaut, in turn, myths are utterances that involve rhetoric in the sense that they enjoin us readers (not just the characters to whom they are addressed) to see things from a different perspective, and hence to modify our behavior. They do not teach a doctrine because their message is 'affective, not argumentative' (45), but they question our view of things and lead us to 'perceive the crushing absurdity in the way men live their lives' (p. 44).

Plato's anonymity (the fact that he never personally endorses any particular doctrine in the dialogues) does not play a significant role for some scholars, while speaking of 'Plato's doctrine' on any particular issue seems to be very problematic for others. This difference expresses itself in stylistic choices as well: some authors (Most, Destrée, Van Riel) do not hesitate to treat an utterance or a thesis defended by a certain character as if it was made by Plato (cfr. pp. 15, 23, 110, 111, 154, 155), while others prefer always to indicate who says what in any given dialogic situation. Personally, I find the latter option not only faithful to the literary character of the dialogues, but also more profitable for interpretation. Attuning to different voices refines our perception of what we can consider salient. This is evident in Gonzales' masterful analysis of the myth of Er, which draws attention to the tension between two voices (that of the priest and that of Socrates) concerning the relationship between luck and philosophical wisdom in the choice of a life that might lead to happiness.

Distinguishing between Plato's doctrine and that of a given character can be tricky. For example, Van Riel attempts to show that Protagoras' myth in the *Protagoras* 'expresses a number of anthropological points which represent Plato's own doctrines' (p. 145). Van Riel offers both a detailed analysis of Protagoras' myth and a comparison between its content and that of other myths (in the *Laws* and the *Statesman*). One important observation is that in the myth told by Protagoras religion belongs to the first stage of human development, while *dikē*

and *aidōs* belong to a second stage. This is Van Riel's conclusion: 'religion—an effect of the possession of fire—is more deeply rooted in human nature than sociality. It is more fundamental, and more "natural" than what is handed over in the second gift. So a religious attitude precedes all kinds of social behavior and of community. That is why Plato refuses to let his lawgivers interfere in religious matters' (pp. 161-162). I wonder whether, thanks to Van Riel's fine distinction between the stages in Protagoras' myth, we should not conclude that the myth contains an implicit critique of primitive religion rather than an endorsement of it. If appreciating justice and feeling shame are alien to original religion, one has no difficulty imagining a religion populated by shameless and unjust gods (gods similar to those portrayed by Homer and Hesiod and criticized by Socrates in the *Republic*). Whether this anthropological point is common to Protagoras and Plato remains, in any case, an open question.

Even when scholars agree that Plato's myths complement the philosophical arguments developed in the dialogues, they do not necessarily interpret complementarity in the same way. One interesting question is whether myths express (or integrate) Plato's theological and political system or, rather, indicate his awareness of the shortcomings of a philosophical system. Myths can be seen to complement arguments in the sense of illustrating, developing with different means, or making emotionally persuasive a certain theory, or they can be seen to complement arguments in a negative, dialectical fashion. In the latter case, myths do not point to a solution, but rather draw attention to a problem that the theory in question does not address.

In the present volume readers will find instances of both interpretative attitudes. On the one hand, Pender's analysis of the final myth of the *Phaedo* aims to show that the complex geography of Tartarus, with its ethical and epistemological implications, supports the teleology for which Socrates argued in the course of the dialogue. The complementarity of *logos* and *muthos* is interpreted similarly by Rowe and Edmonds in their respective analyses of the final myth of judgment in the *Gorgias*. On the other hand, according to Gonzales the final myth of the *Republic* is best understood in juxtaposition to, rather than in continuity with, the main arguments of the *Republic*. The final myth gives central stage to luck, oblivion, carelessness, and draws attention to the importance of external circumstances such as wealth and poverty, health and sickness, strength and weakness. In Gonzalez's own words, 'philosophical reasoning seeks to make the choice between good and bad clear and in our control, but the myth thematizes everything that such reasoning cannot penetrate and master, everything that stubbornly remains dark and irrational' (p. 272). Gonzales is not alone in showing how myths can be in tension with arguments: Larivée and Morgan, for example, share with Gonzales the conviction that certain myths contribute significantly

to showing how problematic embodiment really is, and call into question the neat distinction between body and soul that one would be tempted to attribute to Plato.

It would certainly have been useful to find a discussion of the different interpretative premises underlying the contributions in this book, yet the absence of an open exchange on matters of principle does not make it less interesting. Some chapters are masterful in shedding light on Plato's art of writing. From this point of view it does not really matter whether Gonzales or Dixsaut do not agree with Pender concerning the general function of myth with respect to argument. From their papers readers will learn that Plato uses myths in many different ways, even when from a general perspective the topic is the same. Carefully observing small things is no small undertaking. Several papers in this book show how rewarding such an approach can be.

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