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The Tragedy of Platonic Ethics and the Fall of Socrates

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Abstract: This paper considers the use of myth in the Platonic dialogues. It seeks to demonstrate that Plato takes up the task of rewriting the old myths, not in order to clarify the *real truth* about ancient tales, but to make those tales serve higher—ethical—ends. Thus Plato makes a valiant effort to replace the old "truths" in order to displace and overcome ethically dangerous assumptions in the old tales. But I shall demonstrate that, despite the changes in mythical content, the old tropes endure in the new form and the dangerous elements of myth persist. The elements of myth that I consider to be most dangerous are the motifs of "fallenness" (as characteristic of the human condition) and the irredeemably tragic dimension of earthly existence (configuring mortal life as a matter for despair). These mythologems endure despite the new imagery that seeks to overcome them and they continue to breed a "nostalgia" of loss and tragic origins. This is the archaic infection that I see as the spawning ground of ritualistic patterns of human behaviour that are essentially violent. The infection is sublimated but carried along in new contextual forms in Platonic myth, concealed but dynamically present. The persistence of these dangerous elements, in my reading, signal the failure of the Platonic project of purification—a failure most clearly evidenced in the tragic character of Eros and in the impotence of the philosopher in the city—indeed in Socrates' being ever *atopos* (without or out of place) with regard to the city (in the *Republic*) and missing even from the lofty perches reserved for the philosopher (in the *Theaetetus*) and the lover (in the *Symposium*). There is no place for Socrates—for the truly just and good man—in the real cities down under the heavens. No place for him in the upper world of lofty contemplations. Without him, wealth and power and honour will ever rule the human scene and justice will be the ideal of simple fools.¹ That is the essential tragedy of the human condition as it re-emerges in the Platonic corpus.

Introduction: The Greeks and their Myths

The classical Greek was very much a man of myth even if the belief in the old gods was crumbling and the content of the old stories had been relegated by many to the status of "old wives' tales."² Their very landscape was alive with myth³ and myth formed their cultural blood. This is witnessed in the genuinely Greek pleasure derived from inventing similes and

¹Thrasymachus expresses the general conviction of his time when he states that he is convinced by empirical data and the testimony of the many and the wise that "sobriety and righteousness are fair and honourable, to be sure, but unpleasant and laborious, while licentiousness and injustice are pleasant and easy to win and are only in opinion and by convention disgraceful...injustice pays better than justice... the gods themselves assign to many good men misfortunes and an evil life, but to their opposites a contrary lot..." "Justice only rules those who are simple," he continues, because "the just man always comes out at a disadvantage in his relation with the unjust." (*Republic* 364ab)

²Witness the young Phaedrus in the dialogue of his name, cradling a speech by the orator Lysias under his cloak, but asking with apparent disbelief whether Socrates really believes such stories as the Boreas myth. (229c) In that passage, Socrates expresses no patience for those who tried to rationalize myths, explaining one will need plenty of time for this "rather crude cleverness" and he has no time for such things. Elsewhere (*Euthyphro* 6), he suggests that he neither believes nor disbelieves myth.

³The *Phaedrus* depicts how the hills and streams evoke in old and young the ancient tales.

analogies.⁴ In this regard as in so many others, Plato was nothing if not Greek. "Plato still clung to the mythical tradition of his people."⁵ This explains why we read repeatedly in the dialogues that the best we can do is a likely story. We can only ever approach the truth "using the language of probability" (*Timaeus* 30b).

Enough if we adduce possibilities as likely as any others, for we must remember that we are only mortal men and we ought to accept the tale which is probable and inquire no farther. (*Timaeus* 29cd)

Myths are just that: likely accounts cast in the language of probability.

Plato could tell a good tale and he put many and beautiful "likely stories" into the mouths of his dramatic personae. But Plato's use of myth did not merely seek answers out of a relentless human curiosity. His was not merely the quest for truth that traditional scholarship has emphasized. Plato's writings, in my interpretation, are always in the service of a practical ethical mission: a mission that is "no small matter" with regard to the problems of everyday life and to the art of philosophy *per se*.

For it is no small matter that we are discussing, but the [matter of] the right conduct of life. (*Republic* 252d)

Plato's dialogues seek the truth about *things*, in order that we may discover the truth about *ourselves*. We discover our own foolish self-certainty in that of Euthyphro, our blind loyalty to sedimented truths in Cephalus and the fragility of our opinions in humble failure of Laches and Theaetetus. Plato was willing to use any literary vehicle that might serve to this ethical end.

In Plato, the truth is usually sought first through the vehicle of dialectical inquiry. Socrates is pictured in dialogue after dialogue demonstrating that the dialectical path to truth is a winding and twisted way that often leads in circles or collapses in absurdity.⁶ But in other respects we can legitimately say that the dialectic, as ordered, rational argument that imposes upon the interlocutor the logical consequences of his premises, is a straight and narrow path. When the strict linearity of its course reaches the limits of its usefulness in the search for truth, Plato has the speaker slip into another mode of discourse. He slips into the realm of *mythos*.

However, Plato was not content to merely repeat the old tales as they had been handed

⁴See Friedländer. *Plato*. p.173.

⁵Friedländer. p.173.

⁶Euthyphro states: Somehow everything that we put forward keeps moving about us in a circle and nothing will stay where we put it. (11b)

down by time. In my reading, Plato was firmly convinced that *we become what we behold*⁷ and thus he insisted that the images in our narratives be edifying. Our tales must serve as a kind of *mousikos* in the soul⁸ that the soul might be charmed and intuitively persuaded toward the good. Just as gymnastics and music and the study of astronomy could bypass words and speak directly to the soul about such ideals as order and harmony and right conduct, *mythos* could work in the interest of that just attunement that Plato believed definitive of our humanity.⁹ Thus Plato's use of myth is not a mere re-articulation of the old legends, nor a mere reconfirmation of the old religion.¹⁰ He finds much in the old tales that needs to be discarded, purified and reconfigured. Platonic myth is an attempt to overcome the old myths, to rewrite them as more edifying discourse.¹¹

I. Plato's Project: the Ethical Ascent of Myth

This paper intends to consider the use of myth in the Platonic dialogues. It seeks to demonstrate that Plato takes up the task of rewriting the old myths, not in order to clarify the *real truth* about ancient tales, but to make those tales serve higher—ethical—ends. Thus Plato makes a valiant effort to replace the old "truths" in order to displace and overcome ethically dangerous assumptions in the old tales. But I shall demonstrate that, despite the changes in mythical content, the old tropes endure in the new form and the dangerous elements of myth persist. The elements of myth that I consider to be most dangerous are the motifs of "fallenness" as characteristic of the human condition and the irredeemably tragic dimension of earthly existence configuring mortal life as a matter for despair. These mythologems endure despite the new imagery that seeks to overcome them and they continue to breed a "nostalgia" of loss and tragic origins. This is the archaic infection that I see as the spawning ground of ritualistic patterns of human behaviour that are essentially violent. The infection is sublimated

⁷The *Republic's* system of education reflects this conviction, as does the imagery of the "logos from Kinship" in the *Phaedo* (78d ff. and especially 79c).

⁸This explains how lies can be "noble" hence *Phaedo* 114e, *Gorgias* 527b, *Republic* 621c.

⁹*Republic* 353e.

¹⁰Socrates' lack of interest in the traditional gods is confirmed in many places in the dialogues. At *Epinomis* 984d "one can place them where one likes." *Republic* 427b: "leave the details of religious observances to Apollo." c.f. 461e. Socrates is no less impressed by the foreign, has no natural commitment to orthodox piety the way he feels a special loyalty and responsibility toward the youths of his own polis (*Republic* 327a, *Theaetetus* 143d).

¹¹Thus I disagree with Paul Friedländer who claims that Plato saw the old legends as "fragments of a great myth half-extinguished and fallen apart through the course of time which he set out to purify, connect and create anew." (*Plato*. p.173.)

but carried along in new contextual forms in Platonic myth, concealed but dynamically present.

The persistence of these dangerous elements, in my reading, signal the failure of the Platonic project of purification—a failure most clearly evidenced in the tragic character of Eros and in the impotence of the philosopher in the city—indeed in Socrates' being ever *atopos* (without or out of place) with regard to the city (in the *Republic*) and missing even from the lofty perches reserved for the philosopher (in the *Theaetetus*) and the lover (in the *Symposium*). There is no place for Socrates—for the truly just and good man—in the real cities down under the heavens.

No place for him in the upper world of lofty contemplations. Without him, wealth and power and honour will ever rule the human scene and justice will be the ideal of simple fools.¹² That is the essential tragedy of the human condition as it re-emerges in the Platonic corpus.

Myth bears the seal of *pseudos* but it gives the irrefutable impression that that seal is stamped upon a substance of truth. There is a sense of the solemn about time-honoured tales, a sense of their superhuman origin and their sacred vista over the landscape of truth. Often they claim to have come to verbal manifestation under the madness dispensed by the gods or under the authority of the Muses, priestesses or seers. Myths, "numerous and ancient" in all cultures, assert a connection with the origin of things,¹³ and since, for the Greek, to know a thing is to know its origins, myths carry great persuasive weight, even where they are rationally discarded as blatantly false.¹⁴ They form sacred fragments of the ancient secrets of the world.

Myths then, and especially for the ancient Greek, were inescapable. Thus to take them up and use them could be a very effective strategy; myths could be a valuable vehicle for the conveying of truth. Plato saw that much was wrong with the archaic worldview borne by the

¹²Thrasymachus expresses the general conviction of his time when he states that he is convinced by empirical data and the testimony of the many and the wise that "sobriety and righteousness are fair and honourable, to be sure, but unpleasant and laborious, while licentiousness and injustice are pleasant and easy to win and are only in opinion and by convention disgraceful...injustice pays better than justice... the gods themselves assign to many good men misfortunes and an evil life, but to their opposites a contrary lot..." "Justice only rules those who are simple," he continues, because "the just man always comes out at a disadvantage in his relation with the unjust." (*Republic* 364ab)

¹³*Republic* 271a.

¹⁴This is evident even in the thinking of those who imagine themselves to have broken free from the power of their myths. Aristotle, who asserts at *Metaphysics* I. 2. 982b18 that myth is merely a preliminary stage to philosophy, and at 1000a18 that myths are "mere sophisms" and "not worth worrying about," cannot deny that "the lover of myth is in a way always a lover of wisdom." (*Metaphysics* I.2.982b) See also Richard Stivers (*Evil in Modern Myth and Ritual*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press. 1982.) who sees the continuation of myth, new sacred symbols and decidedly ritualistic behaviours in modern man despite the claims of modernity to be *post mortem dei*.

Greek mythical heritage. This worldview, as Dodds and Hatab have indicated,¹⁵ expresses a general despair, and a sense of human fragility and powerlessness in the face of an overpowering fate. Such a worldview served as a fitting backdrop to the epic notion of a heroic ethic: pride and action throughout all disaster, even in the face of the ultimate futility of these. A strict fatalism rules the mythical scene but the hero accomplishes a celebration of what would otherwise be an existential paradox. This is essentially because of the hero's blindness to his fate until its cruel accomplishment. Thus, with the hero, despair is deferred until the final scene. Hope remains alive to tease him onward, even motivating the actions that will ultimately bring about that fate. Thus despair remains the hidden truth of mortality but, for the hero, despair can never linger or fester internally. Life is lived out to its final moments before the tragic truth of existence, Silenus' wisdom, comes into full view. The hero is special, singled out for graver adversity and a harsher fate than most human beings, but in another sense he is every man. He stands for the best in each of us—an ideal signifying what mere human stuff can achieve, against all odds and in the face of an overwhelming fate, if he has courage, persistence and a little grace from the gods.

The gods of orthodox legend are not themselves so exemplary as the heroic human. They are like wilful children—full of malice and spite and mischief, covetous of what others have and injurious from sheer delight. The gods are the actual powers behind all manner of earthly disaster—crop failure, earthquakes, storms at sea—and their motives are often selfish and greedy. Between the cruel capriciousness of the divine and the cold stringency of a blind necessity, humankind is tossed about and ultimately thrown into a hostile cosmos to a life of desperation and despair.

With the Hesiodic tales of the creation, the origins of gods and men provide a general denial of life's worth. The archaic story of the birth of the universe and the great ages of man tell the truth about things—who they are, what they are in relation to each other, and why they are that way and not another. In this depiction, earthly existence comes about because of a "fall" from a primordial golden era. Humankind is sketched as decadent in its nature and destined to a burgeoning corruptiveness eventuating in utter moral collapse in some distant

¹⁵Lawrence Hatab. *Myth and Philosophy: A Contest of Truths*. p.98. E. R. Dodds. *The Greeks and the Irrational*. esp. Chapter 2. and E.R.Dodds. "Plato and the Irrational Soul." *Plato II*. G.Vlastos, ed. Garden City: Doubleday. 1971.

age. The reasons behind this fated degradation are never made altogether clear. At moments in the stories, it seems that man, having a nature less than perfect, can only blame himself for his moral decay. At others, however, the gods, as imperfect creators of faulty human products and as malicious powers that utilize humans as pawns in their intrigues and infighting, put into question any simple moral reading of man's fate.

2. Edifying Discourse: *Mythos* or *Logos*

Against the power of these "truths" even heroes are helpless, caught in the ebb and flow of world and individual disasters. Greek myth presents a lived world—finite, temporal, value-laden, affective and chance-ridden. It is easy to understand, against this backdrop, the attraction of dialectical form for the philosophical mind. Rational argument turns away from the sacred imagery toward conceptual models of thought. It turns away from the desperate "is" of the lived world toward the ideal "ought" of abstract representations of reality where constancy, unity and universality prevail, where every man with the heroic spirit can escape the tragic and achieve moral, if not ontological, perfection. Rationality leads thought to a certainty beyond the disturbing flux of fleshy and death-ridden existence and the whimsical omnipotence of the gods. Through rational and logical discourse, reason seeks the knowable in fixed forms and structures and attempts an escape from the despair of the tragic.

But rational argumentation finds its limits in Platonic drama. It is true that, through the sorcery of dialectic, Socrates appears in some dialogues to attempt an escape from the archaic worldview where self and world are dangerously intermingled, where gods are the secret reality of nature, and where all are sucked up in a dangerous immediacy, immersed in a lived world. In argument, the self can be extracted from its suffocating contextuality and break free of its embeddedness in world and other beings. It can be isolated and "examined," reoriented and reconfigured. The self, in rational discourse, can be brought to hope against the tragic and to individual responsibility against the unreasonableness of fate. Myth presents a confusing and darkened picture of a lived world; rational models attempt a departure from that darkness.

However, rational discourse can only stray so far from the straight and narrow of its fixed paths and so cannot reach the profound earthiness and fleshiness of man's deepest questioning. In the Platonic dialogues, arguments always show up first and survey the terrain of truth. Thought scouts the landscape for potential pathways beyond the flux. But in the end

it must turn back from the solid unyielding way, must turn aside from the well-lit path of the reasonable. It is then that Plato turns to myth.

From another perspective, however, it could be claimed that myth was going on all along in Plato. Only where a strict conceptual segregation of *logos* and *mythos* is employed, can a distinction be claimed between the arguments of the dialogues and the mythical disclosures. A stark conceptual segregation cannot be justified, as John Sallis has frequently observed.¹⁶ *Mythos* is always conveyed in *logos* and *logos*, like language of any description and origin, is never without its mythical dimension.¹⁷ All discursive forms constituting Platonic drama can be said to be creative mythologizing. What is dramatic dialogue, in general, if not, like myth, the presentation of a defined space for a specific reality—a lived world, framed within fixed borders, within a time and a space all its own? The situation, place, occasion, temporal exigency, specific people encountered, dramatic sequencing, the multiple 'frames' of storytelling that structure the dialogue—all these form a mythical world of their own while remaining the borders of a finite truth from which the myths proper burst free. What is Platonic dialogue if not the invoking of a magical world where truth flies ungraspable from speaker to speaker?

Socrates, the focal persona of the dramas, approaches the dimension of mythical existence in the dramatic eulogies which constitute the Platonic corpus.¹⁸ His daemonic pathway originates in myth, with the mission assigned by the god through the Delphic oracle. Alkibiades, with the insightfulness that only the despair of love can purchase, recognizes the mythical dimension of Socrates. He tells that Socrates resembles no human being, so much *atopos* (out of or without place) is he. He rather resembles the Sileni and the satyrs, even in his physical attributes, and, like the Silenus-like, flute-playing daemon Marsyas, Socrates charms his listeners with his words (*Symposium* 221c ff.).

In the myths that are spun within the Platonic dialogues in the wake of the collapsed

¹⁶*Being and Logos*. See especially Preface.

¹⁷René Girard, anthropologist of religion and literary theorist, states: "There is no term in any language that is not accompanied by mythological inflections." (*Violence and the Sacred*, p.154.) Girard insists throughout this work that myths shape our languages and our cultures and are entirely pervasive of all political and social institutions. Hatab expresses the same sentiment economically: "Myth is therefore another way of saying culture" (p.21.) Hatab sees philosophical thinking growing out of mythical thinking and perhaps in the long run of the history of philosophy this is true. But I disagree that this can be said of the earliest philosophy and it is certainly not true of Plato.

¹⁸Friedländer, p.173.

arguments—often in the wreck of rational discourse and in the rubble of logic and reason¹⁹—Plato paints a world counterpoised against the cruel realities of this one, a world that seeks to redeem Socrates' unjust sentence, a world where in the final analysis, all beings come to a naked justice. Plato punishes Socrates' attackers in a realm of Justice beyond the corrupt courts of law of earthly tribunals—where desserts stand in strict correlation to the corruption of the soul—where tyrants are mercilessly penalized and philosophers given due honours at last.²⁰

Plato, in many of the myths, sketches a Pythagorean view of the universe—an orderly, mathematical system. For example, the myth of the creation of the cosmos in the *Timaeus* fulfils all that Socrates wanted all along in a cosmology, one ordered according to the good—the hope for which Socrates reproached Anaxagoras for having disappointed.²¹ This myth, like many in the corpus, are meant to entirely displace and eclipse the earlier myths of origin, so hopelessly tragic in their orientation, so subject to the uncaring whimsy of the gods and of Moira.

Some of the Platonic myths take up the themes of earlier legends and while appearing on the surface to repeat the tale intact—"These old stories have been told before and will be told again."²²—make crucial changes to the original content. Hesiod portrays a world evolved out of primeval chaos, torn by strife and populated by monsters and brought to order only through the most brutal acts of violence—the latter ironically explained in the tale as Zeus' wise diplomacy. Men are born in great ages that reflect the better or the worse creative abilities of the gods. Finally in the age of iron humans are cast out of the heavens, abandoned by the gods and cursed to a life of toil and trouble.

¹⁹Friedländer states: Myths "presuppose conceptual analysis and carry it beyond the limits set for human existence and human knowledge." (p.189) G.M.A. Grube expands this view: "Myth however dimly truth represents what the human intellect or that of a particular audience cannot reach scientifically." (*Plato's Thought*. Indianapolis: Hackett. 1980. p.204.) The latter besides positing the beyond-rationality of *mythos* also hints toward the old interpretation of myth (out of Aristotle) as picture-thinking for the common man incapable of following rational argument.

²⁰The *Gorgias* myth depicts a world beyond as a continuation of this life, but one where a just tribunal dishes out rewards and punishments in accordance with the life lived. In the *Phaedo*, these images could be said to expand to include the earth in its vision of wholeness and justice. In the *Republic*, this imagery expands again to consume man and the state under a cosmic vision of order. In contrast, the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus* begin in the cosmos, posit order and harmony as the general rule of things, but then trouble that ordered vision with the blind necessity of the material and the passionate and bodily realities of the mortal existence.

²¹*Phaedo* 72c. c.f. *Gorgias* 465d.

²²*Statesman* 268e.

3. The Statesman Myth: Falling Out of the Gods' Love

Plato retells the old legend in the *Statesman* myth, but makes subtle but crucial alterations in the content. This time the tale opens in a golden era, peaceful from the outset. The gods, in this the age of Kronos, hold firm the helm against the winds of fate. They are beneficent, governing well and fairly. Like shepherds, heavenly daemons care lovingly for the people, watching over their safety and taking responsibility even for their nourishment. In due course the universe is determined to fall into a reverse motion, when the god is obliged to withdraw. But this is done to allow the world to come fully into its own—to follow its own free impulse and the ways of its bodily nature. These great ages alternate according to the dictates of time, and not due to some malicious whim on the part of a jealous god or to the blind recklessness of fate. The Stranger tells:

There is an era in which God himself assists the universe on its way and guides it by imparting its rotation to it. There is also an era in which he releases his control. He does this when its circuits under his guidance have completed the due limit of the time thereto appointed. Thereafter it begins to revolve in the contrary sense under its own impulse—for it is a living creature and has been endowed with reason by him who framed it in the beginning. (269cd)

Even the gods, in this retelling of the tale, have their limits in eternal decrees built into the nature of things.²³ The gods in the ancient legend are also under the sway of the four moral norms, *Dike* (justice), *Tukhe* (chance), *Ananke* (necessity) and *Moirai* (fate). But of the four, the latter three tend toward the human tragedy, and only justice, heavily outnumbered, promises just desserts.

However, Plato is not content to merely retell the tale anew. He recognizes that myth is of such a nature that it imposes a task upon life. Thus he must open within the tale the space of responsibility, the site of the ethical imperative. This he does by having the Stranger conclude by asking, in regard to the great ages of the myth, the philosophical question:

But which of these two makes for greater happiness do you think? Can you give a verdict? And will you do so? (272b)

²³269e.

The answer, according to the stranger, cannot be disentangled from the "crucial question" of whether the nurslings of Kronos made a right use of their time. The Stranger states:

[The humans] had abundance of leisure and were at an advantage in being able to converse with the animals as well as with one another. Did they use all these advantages to promote philosophical inquiry. As they associated with one another and with the animals, did they seek to learn from each several tribe of creatures whether its special faculties enabled it to apprehend some distinctive truth not available to the rest which it could bring as its contribution to swell the common treasure store of wisdom? If they really did all this it is easy to decide that the happiness of the men of [the golden] era was a thousandfold greater than ours. But if, when they had taken their fill of eating and drinking, the discussions they had with each other and with the animals were of the kind that the surviving stories make them out to have been, then, according to my judgement at any rate, it is equally clear what our verdict must be. (272bc)

Plato makes a valiant effort to open new ethical pathways and thus purge the ancient tales of their decrees of inescapable human decadence. He reconfigures the gods as beneficent and establishes the "natural" ways of man, state and cosmos as essentially ordered and harmonious, intertwined in their very natures. Thus he raises our ethical possibilities beyond the despair and the tragedy of mortal "beginnings" and futile endings. Our humanity is no longer merely something that we are, but becomes something we must strive to achieve. Platonic myth, as a self-conscious recognition of the human situation in the cosmos, depicts the human condition, with all its constraints and limitations, as capable of challenging and transcending those limits. Humans are erotic precisely because they are capable of striving against the fate to which their incomplete and limited condition condemns them.

4. Ethical Ascents or Tragic "Falls"

Nevertheless, despite all that Plato *does achieve* in overcoming the content of archaic myth, the images of "fall" endure. In the *Timaeus*, the law of continual decline from an original state of perfection casts the fate of souls; souls are ever losing themselves in lower and lower forms of incarnation. The *Republic*, from its opening words ("I went down yesterday..."), resonates the "fall." The philosopher is depicted again and again as a degraded, ridiculed and useless stargazer who is ill at home down under the heavens. The cave allegory in Book Five makes explicit the manner of conceptual "fallenness" of humankind in their cities, and the political "fall" is sketched in the catalogue of constitutions in Book Eight. Here, the downward spiral of

states is an altogether natural decline necessitated by time and the frailty of man and the faulty institutions that are of his making. In the *Gorgias*, the "fall" endures as the stunning downward spiral of human character depicted in the shift from the decent enough Sophist, Gorgias, to the shameless young fool, Polus, and finally to Callicles, tyrant in the flesh.

In the *Phaedrus*, the "fall" is made explicit. Soul breaks off from its origin in World Soul, where it once shared in governing the entire universe. It drops down to cling to any bodily thing for safety and is confined to that body thereafter (246ab). In another telling, the soul, imaged as a charioteer and two horses, is on its way to the heavens when its *phthonos* (greed, selfishness, jealousy, competitiveness, covetousness which distinguishes the human from the gods) kicks in. Stomping on its neighbours' wings, thrashing and colliding with their chariots, soul tumbles from the heavens to live lives of various degrees of debasement (248 ff).

In the *Critias*, the geological counterpart of the "fall" lies in the degeneration of the originally "excellent" Attic soil, the "generous water supply" and the "eminently temperate climate" (111e). In ironic juxta-position to the "great ages" of decline in the legends,²⁴ it takes but a single night for a terrible deluge and an earthquake to lay all men's accomplishments to waste. In the *Timaeus*, the "fall" again resounds, when—again in a moment's misfortune, a single day and night—violent earthquakes and floods cast the fate of a great civilization the like of which will never again be seen on earth. Critias tells with a tone of deepest finality: "all your warlike men in a body sank into the earth, and the island of Atlantis in like manner disappeared into the sea."

The images of "fall" in the Platonic myths, however, are matched by the abundant imagery of ascent. The *Republic's* cave allegory shows the quest for right vision as a function of ascent from the twisted realities of the underground cavern. In the *Theaetetus*, the discourse on the philosopher takes the philosopher soaring above the city and its daily concerns.²⁵ In the *Phaedrus*, the essential attribute of the soul is its "wingedness" and its natural thrust is heaven-bound. The strength of those wings determines the soul's potential for the nourishment of the virtues. The soul has a lofty origin, the whole universe being its original

²⁴The great ages so common in legend show up in Plato as the periodic sequences of arrival and withdrawal of the god, forward and reverse motions of the universe, of the *Statesman* myth. Also in the periodic sequences governing the fate of the soul in the *Phaedrus* myth (248c ff.), merely hinted at in the *Phaedo* (107e) as "the many great revolution of the ages." In the *Republic*, the thousand year journey is the tenfold penalty for a lifetime (615a).

field of action, and human souls are pictured in the grand parade of the gods heading up and away toward the Feast of Being.

The *Symposium's* Ladder of Love shows all manner of creativity, from the bodily to the political to the artistic and the philosophical, expressed as divine undertakings with immortality as their lofty goal. In this vision, human beings are claimed fully capable of the entire ascent. They can climb the ascending rungs, healing their mortality and their incompleteness, until they reach the summit and the erotic transcendence of their wounds in the sheer bliss of Beauty in itself.

Platonic myth continues the trope of the "fall" but counterpoises and even unbalances it with an abundant imagery of ascent. The images of ascent work against the tragic: man's "wingedness" signifying man's natural upward thrust, his bent toward the Good, and the his place in the train of the gods freely chosen. In Platonic myth, humans—over against an unyielding fate—stand free as moral agents making ethical choices. The new sense of individual responsibility offers hope against the power of Moira. People can take charge of their destinies by learning to alter their behaviour.

5. The Paradigmatic Tragedy: the “Fall” of Socrates

However, Plato himself ultimately "falls" into the dangerous despair of the ancient tales in the most telling images of all. In the image of Eros, the tragedy is never-ending. The *Symposium's* myth, branded with the authoritative seal of the priestess, depicts a daemon of love who has plenty (from his father Poros) and yet always wants for more (from his mother Penia). Barefoot and hungry, he sleeps in doorways and out under the stars, always longing and yearning, always having but never satisfied. In this dialogue, and again in the *Phaedrus*, the daemon ultimately collapses into the *philosophos*, the *mousikos* and the erotic lover. As *mousikos*, follower of the Muses, he is also the teller of stories,²⁶ the artist and the lovesick madman. But ultimately, and most significantly, Eros is Socrates—always seeking that which he can never have.

In the grand constructions of the *Republic*, where justice is said to reside at last (if only in *logos*) Socrates does not show up. The city may function smoothly with the happiness of the

²⁵ Similarly in the *Meno* (81d).

²⁶ despite Socrates' ironic claim at 61b of the *Phaedo* that he is "no teller of tales."

whole intact, everyone fed and satisfied. But there is no place for Socrates. Socrates is *atopos* again. He could never be that philosopher-king. The philosopher-ruler is wise and has an intimate knowledge of the true form of things, and knows how to apply that knowledge to the just regulation of the state. In the *Republic*, as in all other of the Platonic images of ascent, we never witness anywhere the ascent successfully enacted. As Bernard Freydberg observes:

On every occasion when it is discussed with any intensity, Socrates stops short of the top. Either he employs some pretext, such as suggesting to Glaucon that the latter is not bright enough to follow; or he employs language suited to the bottom rather than the top of the divided line, such as giving the whole truth as it *appears* to him. (533a1-6 features both dodges).²⁷

Freydberg further notes that the crucial "turning points" in the *Republic* tend to occur far from the light of the argumentation "in dark places":

...under the earth with the ancestor of Gyges (359b6-360b2), under the earth where the three metals and their bearers are forged (414d1-415b7), under the earth in the cave (514a1-518c3), and under the earth in the tale of Er which closes the dialogue (614b2-end).²⁸

Tragically, the just city is never meant to be a reality, the philosopher will never be found valuable or useful. The most striking evidence for this is the necessity of the most preposterous "noble lies" (autochthony and the metallic constitution of souls at *Republic* 414b). Socrates never really makes it to the Feast of Being either. He does not show up in the lofty circumspections of the *Theaetetus*. The philosopher of that discourse knows nothing of the city, the law courts or the market place. That philosopher knows nothing of the ancestry of the prominent families. But this is not the Socrates that we have come to know through Plato.²⁹ Socrates cannot even make the full ascent of Diotima's ladder. Though the climb is *in theory* available to all lovers, Diotima is explicit about Socrates' potential for the ascent (*Symposium* 209e-210a).

Conclusion

Socrates remains "fallen" like all the rest of us. And, worse, as the philosopher, *mousikos*, *erotikos*, he is all of us, all lovers, all fools, all connection with the gods and other higher

²⁷*The Play of the Platonic Dialogues*. p.27-8.

²⁸Freydberg. p.28.

²⁹Socrates knows nothing outside the city, as the *Phaedrus* shows, and knows much of the human history therein. He knows Theaetetus' heritage before he even meets the boy.

things. The heroic philosopher, he represents the best in every man. Yet his situation remains irredeemably tragic. The very activity of striving to escape his "fallenness" condemns him to it. Tragic to the point of the comic. His striving is like that of the laughable round hybristic creatures of Aristophanes' myth in the *Symposium*—a quixotic obsessive questing, searching after the lost perfection, the completeness, the *topos* of his belonging. The quest itself is foolish. Socrates will always be *atopos*, tragically without a place.

Thus it must be said in regard to Platonic myth that—despite a valiant effort at purifying the old myths and replacing them with less dangerous content, despite the reconfiguration of the gods and the openings pried in fate to make room for ethical choice—ultimately the most dangerous elements of myth remain. The imagery of the "fallenness" of humankind—the inevitable downward spiral of all things mortal and bodily and the tragedy of man's silly concern for self-knowledge in the futility of the efforts of the best of us—is carried along in the new imagery and infects the entire project.

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