

Myth and Rhetoric in the *Gorgias*

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1. The unity of myth and logos.

The reception of platonic thought in the history of philosophy has conferred myths with a diverse lot, from (a) those who sought to do away with it, stating, as Hegel did, that myths can be dismissed as alien to the true philosophy of Plato, to (b) those who have overvalued it, considering myths to be an exceptional path to gain access to certain problems that cannot be addressed through logos, thereby constituting the highest expression of Platonic metaphysics¹. Myth should be understood in its indivisible unity with logos: myth cannot be eliminated because the basic logical concepts by which Plato articulates his philosophy are in many cases intertwined with the categories and schemes of thought emerging from myth²; however, myth does not go beyond logos, because Plato is conscious of the epistemological limitations of myth, which, as he dared define, is discourse "in general false but that contains something of truth" (*Republic* II 377a5-6).

In my opinion, a Platonic dialogue is constructed in such a way that its unity makes sense of all the elements that comprise it. Our interpretation cannot, therefore, dispense with the mythic form that Plato has chosen as a means of expressing some of the ideas of which he is firmly convinced, and we must inquire into the reasons for myth in the economy of the Platonic dialogue. However, there is a second reason to do so, which takes us to the very heart of the Platonic concept of myth. The existence of a judgement after death, to which the eschatological myths refer, cannot be demonstrated in any way. When Protagoras told his famous version of the myth of Prometheus, he could transmit his thought equally by either myth or logos (*Protagoras* 320c3-4), because in reality this is a transparent allegory that can be translated into merely rational and argumentative language³. However, this is not the case with Plato. I am not saying that Plato has not used the allegorical myths themselves⁴, but rather that in counterpoint to mere allegory the particular character of the eschatological myths is their attempt to express something that cannot be stated in the language of logos⁵.

¹ (a) Hegel (1883), vol. II, 150 sq.; (b) see, e.g., Hirsch (1971), X, R.C. Stewart (1989), 277, Rechenauer (2002), 234.

² On the unity of myth and dialectic or myth and "the most intimate" philosophical thought of Plato, see, e.g., Brochard (1912), 5 sq., Findlay (1980), 165, Carchia (1986), 41-64, n. 216.

³ Nevertheless, see Morgan (2003), 138 sq.

⁴ On the differences between myth and allegory see, e.g., Frutiger (1930), 101-103 and J.A. Stewart (1905), 222 and 236.

⁵ See, in this sense, García Calvo (1964), 306.

2. Myth comes to the aid of logos.

Callicles (486b) accuses Socrates of practising a type of wisdom that leaves the human defenceless against the contingencies of life in the *polis*, given that it would not provide the capacity for self-defence (486c). This is a kind of wisdom the incapacity of which is judged in light of the two fundamental characteristics by which Callicles assesses the appropriateness of the word (486a2) – that is, credibility and persuasion. It is the rhetorical ideal of discourse, the values of which Plato vigorously opposes in the name of a moral doctrine that invokes the inner order of the spirit as the true foundation of human existence. The response to Callicles is formulated by Socrates "with reasoning of iron and steel" (509a1-2) and, in short, has much to say from a rational standpoint in favour of wisdom and its meaning in human life. Indeed, the refutation of hedonism and the rejection of an instrumentalist conception of reason are very important from a mere argumentative perspective.

Socrates furthermore appeals to the stories of an ingenious man (493a on, 493d3) and images (493d5) filled with plasticity to persuade Callicles that unrestrained behaviour is a disgrace to the soul and is a terrible existence (492e), but all these expressive resources still remain almost entirely on the horizon of the earthly dimension of human life, and in fact are easily translatable to argued discourse characteristic of logos⁶.

However, the fact remains that such images do not succeed in persuading (493d1-4) Callicles to change his position. The refutation of hedonism, meticulously argued by Socrates had no effect at all on Callicles (501c7), who merely answered to please Gorgias until abandoning the conversation (505c5-e1; 516b4, 516c8, etc.). The dialogue develops the dramatic action with complete coherence that demands the presence of myth. This does not appear previously, as has been indicated on more than one occasion⁷, but rather at the end of the work, as occurs with the other great eschatological myths of the *Phaedo* or the *Republic*. From my perspective, the dialogue itself presents the reasons that make mythic discourse necessary. Among these are, firstly, the repeated threats of Callicles throughout the work. He predicts that Socrates will be incapable of defending himself or his followers and thus will perish unjustly accused (486b6, 522c6). Still, this signifies the apparent superiority of rhetoric over the philosophy practised by Socrates and over the uselessness of a kind of knowledge that gives itself only to charlatanism and to meaningless trifles (486c8, 497b7) that fail to help a man in danger. The inferiority of philosophy, alleged by Callicles, is demonstrated in the tribunal before which Socrates is destined to appear (521c5). The response of Socrates does not lack argued reasoning (*cfr.* 508c6, 509b4, 509b7, 509c3, c8, etc.) aimed at showing that the most powerful defence (522d2-3) is "to say nothing unjust against men or against the gods" (522c-d). This defence, however, works only within the inner world of values that rule the *kósmos* of the soul. Rhetoric triumphs in the distorted order of the *polis* in which Socrates is to be condemned as a doctor prosecuted by a cook before a jury of children (521e3-4). If the threats of Callicles are the reasons, within the work itself, which demand the presence of myth to pronounce the final word in the conflict between philosophy and rhetoric, myth is called for also by the situation of the reader. When the reader has the *Gorgias* in his hands, he knows that Socrates indeed perished unjustly condemned. Throughout the work, the ideals of justice and moderation are argued for on the basis of an earthly concept of existence and soul. However, this argumentation, in the eyes of

⁶ Zaslavsky, 1981, 196-7, attributes a mythic character to these paragraphs, whereas others deny this (Frutiger (1930), 112). In 493b4-7, there is a clear reference to the punishment that the uninitiated will receive in Hades (see Guthrie (1980), 305), but the fundamental objective is to show that the dissolute are obligated to undergo "extreme hardships" (494a1) in this life for the type of existence they have chosen.

⁷ See Friedländer, (1973), 189.

the reader, would have been insufficient and Plato is obliged to seek in the afterlife a new dimension of human existence without which the Socratic theory of the soul would lead to an unconvincing tragic heroism.

For this reason, myth must come to the aid of logos, invoking the eschatological superiority of the soul⁸. Myth places Callicles at a trial in the hereafter, where he will be as defenceless and unarmed as Socrates in front of his earthly judges (527a1-3). The eschatological dimension enables a reversal of the terms, allowing Socrates to censure Callicles, because the latter will not be able to help himself when he has to face the ultimate destiny of his soul (526e4-5). The differences observed between this myth and the other eschatological myths of Plato derive in part from the rhetorical nature of the situation in which Socrates finds himself, in which the theme of the trial dominates the scene⁹. The solitude of the soul in the state¹⁰ and its vulnerability in the randomness of political struggles is reversed in the scenario of myth thanks to the transcendental dimension that is opened up. The set has been designed by Plato to dismantle the power of rhetoric, the strength of which depends only on the dominance of injustice in a world distorted by political battles. Myth opens a "contest" (ἀγών, 526e4) that, in Socrates' opinion, bears more importance than all the previous ones that have taken place. Its fundamental feature is that rhetorical resources are of no use in it: its transcendental nature corrects the injustices of trials that are held in this world under the auspices and with the very techniques of rhetoric. This is because, in the hereafter, the soul is judged naked – that is, without being able to hide itself in the realm of appearances, where the persuasive skills of orators exert their force. Rhetoric is not authentic knowledge because it builds its persuasion under the cover of verisimilitude, which has value only for the ignorant (459d5-6, 465b3-5, etc). However, the nakedness of the soul, stripped of the body, makes it impossible to conceal the truth that in earthly trials permits criminals to veil their evil with images of illusion and deceit. The beauty and nobility of the accused, or his wealth and the witnesses (523c5-6) that he might call in his favour, together with "credible and persuasive" words that take advantage of all these assets, do not aid the soul, which must face judges who cannot be deceived because they also have been stripped of their bodies and their passions, so that in the trial it is "the soul by itself" (523e3) that judges, free of any illusion. Myth dramatically constructs a situation which is able to dissolve the realm of appearances that allows the triumph of rhetoric, because the soul has to reveal the truth of its moral nature and disclose whether there is something truly healthy in it (524e4) or whether it is the result of lies and flattery in which rhetoric has educated it, keeping it away from the truth (525a3). With this, furthermore, moral doctrine is naturally reversed, because the virtues that Callicles had extolled (492c) are precisely those that caused him to be condemned in the trial where the soul must confront its fate.

3. Myth and persuasion.

Plato has insisted many times on the persuasive function of myths, and this attribute is especially relevant in those that are eschatological in nature, because they constitute a moral exhortation intended to imprint a certain direction on human will in favour of justice and moderation (527c5)¹¹. For a person such as Callicles, who is ruled by pleasure and who does

⁸ See Szlezák (1992), 269.

⁹ See Annas (1982), 122-125, Alt (1982), 285 sq.

¹⁰ See Reinhardt (1960), 238.

¹¹ On the persuasive function of myths, see Brisson (1982), 93 sq., 145, 171, etc.; Pieper (1984), 68-70; Vallejo (1993), *passim*; also in the *Phaedo*, Socrates finds himself as though he were before a tribunal (63b-d), in front of people

not allow himself to be persuaded by Socratic reasoning (494a-b), a discourse suited to his soul must be constructed (cf. *Phaedrus* 271a1-b5), and myth here, as in the *Phaedo* (114d), is conceived to fight against a *páthos* and act on sensitivity¹². In the myth, regardless of whatever true doctrine lies within it, there are elements of discourse that are directed at the irrational, because Plato in the *Gorgias* is now especially concerned with this part of the soul in which the passions reside (493b1), precisely for being easy to manipulate and persuade (493a6-7). Despite that Plato believes in the essential truth of eschatological myth, he would have no objection in accepting, as we know (*Republic* 377a5-6), that myth is a mixture of truth and fantasy and in which there is, therefore, broad space to design a discourse that speaks with images appropriate to this part of the soul. Plato indeed resorts to images capable of evoking pleasure and above all pain (525b7, 525c5-6), not only in the *Gorgias*, but also in the other eschatological myths of the *Phaedo* (114a-b) and the *Republic* (614e6-615a4), precisely to act on this irrational part of the soul, which does not allow itself to be exorcised by the logical reasoning of argumentation.

In this sense, it could be stated that myth constitutes a reversal of the rhetorical situation, with which it has many elements in common. First of all, as we see, it does not address reason, but rather that part of the soul where the passions reside (*Gorgias* 493b1) or to that frightened "child" in each of us (*Phaedo* 77d-e)¹³, whom we must try to persuade and even dissuade from false beliefs (77e4-6) with the charming discourse of myth. Pleasure and pain are the basic psychological mechanisms by which persuasion occurs in this part of the soul. Both are instruments of sensitivity and by means of them the soul is "nailed" to the body, which forces it to believe that whatever the body states is true (*Phaedo* 83c5 and d6). Persuasion results when the soul feels "obligated to believe" (83c5) and the most effective psychological mechanism to achieve this consists, in short, of using pain and pleasure, because these move it to consider truer whatever is associated with its most intense emotional experiences¹⁴. Secondly, however, Socrates appears as a *conjurer* (ἐπιφθόσος 78a1) of the evils and fears that assail the soul, because his eschatological rhetoric pursued the same end as should guide true rhetoric (*Gorgias* 504d-e), which consists of transforming those passions (517b5) in order to reestablish the health of the soul and do everything necessary in favour of justice (527c3-4). Thirdly, Socrates knows that the persuasive potential of rhetoric, and consequently the power that this places within reach is determined by whether the orator respects the beliefs of the audience being addressed (513b8-c2). Therefore, even when Plato can operate with great liberty in adapting his mythic tales to the moralizing purposes that he pursues, he must make use of the mythic tradition to "give an air of orthodoxy"¹⁵ to the tale that makes it consistent with the beliefs of the listener. Let us recall that this is not only Callicles but also the reader addressed by the *Gorgias*, and therefore its mythic eschatology invokes Homer from the very beginning in order to connect with the endoxa of the community, which provide the frame of reference by which the persuasive verisimilitude of the word must abide.

Fourthly, we might ask ourselves about the epistemic framework on which myth is based. Gorgias said in the *Encomium* (82DKB11) that the word is a "great sovereign" that

that are not easily persuaded (63a, 77e, 84d-e, etc.); cfr. *Republic* 621c, where myth can save us "if we allow ourselves to be persuaded by it."

¹² See Boyancé (1937), 156-7; Edelstein (1949), 472 sq.; Smith (1986), 23; Brisson (1982), 93 and 144, Vallejo (1993), 172-3, etc. On the relationship between myth and incantation in Plato, see Boyancé (1937), 155-165; Laín (1958), 298-333; Dodds (1980), 199, Morrow (1953), 238 sq.; and Brisson (1982), 96 sq.

¹³ Cfr. *Republic* 330d7-8.

¹⁴ Cfr. *Phaedo* 83c6-7.

¹⁵ Dodds (1959), 373; see also Segal (1978), 326, Ward (2002), 14 sq., Most (2002), 11-13.

takes refuge in "the vacillations and lack of certainty of opinion". Rhetorical persuasion is clearly delineated in the *Gorgias* as a conviction that is transmitted to the ignorant (459a4) concerning issues of which the orator has no knowledge either (459b8). Now, myth also exerts its persuasive power by the ignorance of humans regarding their final destiny. If they had this *prónoia* to which Gorgias refers (82DKB11.7), it would be impossible to persuade them, in the same way as the judges could not be convinced of the innocence of the accused if they had witnessed his crime. Plato is fully conscious of the uncertainty in which myth operates, although he considers it true (523a2), because this makes sense in the space that emerges in human discourse when, "investigating", we cannot "find anything better or truer" (527a7-8). This brings him closer once again to rhetoric for the dependence of the *dóxa* in which he must work, since myth can convey only beliefs, no matter how respectable they may be¹⁶. Myth cannot function on the same level as *logos*, but rather goes much further to penetrate a sphere where there is room only to hope and to confront the risk of believing (*Phaedo* 114d 5-6). In my opinion, it is a mistake to underestimate the difference between the two levels. There are those who contend that myth does nothing more than transpose in images "the lines drawn first by rational analysis"¹⁷ or that myth upholds "metaphysical presuppositions" that can be translated from the *pístis* to true opinion and from this to rational knowledge¹⁸, but Plato has enough epistemic sensibility to insist that this represents discourse of another kind. Its true moral can be completely consistent with the virtues of justice for human life, as can be elucidated by means of *logos*, but myth, with its eschatological dimension, opens another world of considerations "beyond human understanding"¹⁹. The myth of *Er* is the supernatural revelation of a man who has returned from the other world, while the mythic eschatology of the *Gorgias* is based on the beliefs of Socrates²⁰ (524a8), and the tale of *Phaedo* expresses a truth upheld through a dramatic setting that "no reasonable person" (114d2) could regard as true. It cannot be assured rationally that there will be a judgement of the soul after death: this cannot be demonstrated and therefore, for the very uncertainty of the proposition, the persuasion operating in the myth is possible.

Finally, I find another similarity between rhetoric and mythology, this being the attitude that mythic discourse demands of the listener. Certainly, its *makrologia* nature moves closer to the *κλήσις* distinctive of Protagoras (*cfr. Protagoras* 328d4) than to Socratic dialectic, because now what is demanded of the listener or reader is not so much that he activate his intelligence, with the corrosive effect that this could exert on all belief, but simply that "he listen" (*ἀκουέ* 523a1, *cfr. Republic* 614d3) and witness the spectacle of the images that the orator places before his eyes²¹.

The transcendental dimension of human existence and the judgement of the soul in the hereafter enable, in this scenario, the deflation of the ostensible power enjoyed by rhetoric in the Athenian state; but the question is whether the Platonic myths inaugurate a new rhetoric. The response cannot be unyielding. On the one hand, many points of connection exist, as we have seen, because both rhetoric and Platonic eschatological mythology are at the service of

¹⁶ On the relationship between myths and *dóxa*, see, e.g., Levi (1946), 220-225; Tarrant (1990), 20-22, denies that myth transmits "true opinions" (22), but it is difficult to see how myth can exert any effect without the existence of opinions, e.g., those referring to the destiny of the soul in the hereafter.

¹⁷ Jaeger (1972), 540, attributes to the myth in the *Gorgias* a mere function of "summary and synthesis within the work of art".

¹⁸ See McMinn (1990), 225 and 234; Bescond (1986), 67-87 and Anton (1963/4), 165 and 171.

¹⁹ See Friedländer (1973), 189; see also Guthrie (1970), 241 sq. Dodds (1945), 23, speaks, in my opinion, correctly of two types of truths – truths of religion and truths of reason. The former cannot be demonstrated, such as the existence of a judgement after death, and Plato "does not claim for these more than a mere probability".

²⁰ See Irwin (1979), 243.

²¹ Myth, as Mattéi (1988), 69, stated, "reduces the listener to passivity".

persuasion. However, there are also differences, since this sort of rhetoric in Plato, as in Aristotle, is also, in the apt expression of P. Ricoeur, a "rhetoric under the vigilance of philosophy"²². I do not believe that its potential lies in prompting an "impulse for knowledge"²³ in the soul to project it into the upper sphere of the *ἐπιστήμη*, but the persuasion at which Plato is aiming is undoubtedly a point of encounter and mediation of reason with the other irrational powers of human life, and is not, like the rhetoric practiced by Gorgias (459c sq.), a mere instrument that is morally neutral and which can be placed at the service of the highest bidder. It is discourse directed at the irrational, which touches the emotional fibres of the soul, but bears a message for mankind and constitutes discourse of moral exhortation that has been designed by the intelligence to overcome forces which, left to their own dynamic, threaten to destroy the inner cosmos that makes human existence possible.

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²² Ricoeur (1980), 17.

²³ "Erkenntnisimpulses", as stated by Rechenauer (2002), 240.