

Kathryn Morgan



# m<sub>y</sub>th

Philosophy

from the Presocratics to Plato

## MYTH AND PHILOSOPHY FROM THE PRESOCRATICS TO PLATO

This book explores the dynamic interpenetration of myth and philosophy in the Presocratics, the sophists, and in Plato – an interpenetration which is found to be more extensive and programmatic than has previously been recognised. The story of philosophy's relationship with myth is that of its relationship with literary and social convention. The intellectuals studied here wanted to reformulate popular ideas about cultural authority, and they achieve this goal by manipulating myth. Their self-conscious use of myth creates a self-reflective philosophical sensibility and draws attention to problems inherent in different modes of linguistic representation. Much of the reception of Greek philosophy stigmatises myth as 'irrational'. Such an approach ignores the important role played by myth in Greek philosophy, not just as a foil but as a mode of philosophical thought. The case studies in this book reveal myth deployed as result of methodological reflection, and as a manifestation of philosophical concerns.

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PRESOCRATICS TO  
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## CHAPTER I

### *Introduction*

This is not a book about ‘mythical thinking’, although it is about both myth and thought. Treatments of mythical thinking try to specify some system of thought as ‘other’, as primitive, mystical, childish, or irrational. The difficulties of identifying and explaining purported different mentalities are by now well known, and the explanatory utility of such a procedure is limited.<sup>1</sup> Nor do I wish to attempt a rehabilitation of ‘myth’ in the face of ‘philosophy’. It has been suggested, for instance, that myth is a ‘pre-philosophical “mirror” of existential thought’, a liberation from excessive abstraction and objectivism, a primal, original, and essential form of truth.<sup>2</sup> The validity of these assertions I am unable to gauge, for the myth with which this book is concerned is post-philosophical. It is myth seen through a philosophical lens and incorporated into philosophical discourse. As a form of truth it is neither primal nor original. From the standpoint of the philosophers we shall meet in the following pages, non-philosophical myth is a story about truth that is often pernicious and misleading. The myth they incorporate serves their own ends. These ends are: the reformulation of people’s ideas about literary and cultural authority, the problematisation of the different modes of linguistic representation, and the creation of a self-reflective philosophical sensibility.

The story of philosophy’s relationship with and transformation of myth is the story of its relationship with convention, both literary and societal. The intellectuals studied in this book wanted to change the way people conceived the world about them. This project involved reconfiguring the authority of a poetic and mythological tradition that had long served as the inescapable framework for thought. At the same time, however, these thinkers had to work with existing linguistic and literary resources. There was no option to make a fresh start, free from the

<sup>1</sup> Lloyd 1990.      <sup>2</sup> Hatab 1990: 3.

constraints of previous language, since language itself is a creature of convention. I contend that any study of the rise of philosophy from the sixth to the fourth centuries BC must be, at least in part, a study of literary/rhetorical expression, since philosophical insight must be communicated through a medium that is, from the philosophical point of view, always potentially tainted. The philosophical authors studied here simultaneously contend with a non-philosophical literary past and forge a new philosophical literary awareness. Philosophical writing constructs an image for an intellectual endeavour with the same rhetorical tools employed by generations of poets. Myth is one of these tools, and it is an important one. More than that, I argue, it can be seen as representative (in the cases studied here) of philosophy's relationship with the literary and linguistic past. The self-consciousness with which myth is deployed signals a pervasive concern with philosophy's self image: its troubled connection with the poetic past and its desire to present insight persuasively. It also encapsulates uncertainties about the nature and function of language. Language is not a transparent medium, then, but is itself an object of philosophical scrutiny; myth stands for and exaggerates the problematic aspects of language.

We can distinguish two broad areas where the study of myth in philosophy is likely to yield fruitful results. First, in the scrutiny of philosophical self-presentation. Second, in the examination of the dynamic interpenetration of myth and philosophy, which is more extensive and more programmatic than has previously been recognised. These two areas are, of course, related, and it will be useful to sketch briefly here the various ramifications of myth's philosophical presence. The conceptual exclusion of the mythological world of the poets serves as a powerful form of philosophical self-identification. A challenge to the privileged relationship between poet and Muse goes hand in hand with rejection of poets' lying tales. Thus Xenophanes divests poetry of its roots in divine revelation through his scepticism and his moral reserve. Parmenides replaces the Muse with an anonymous goddess of uncertain status. She too can tell both the truth, and false things like true things, but we are left wondering how 'seriously' we should take her. Plato's Sokrates proliferates (ironically) the sources of authority he cites for the myths and ideas that he marks as not his own, and this proliferation undermines rather than strengthens the traditional role of the Muses. Indeed, the structural equivalent to the Muses is Sokrates' 'divine sign', the *daimonion*. Its role is restricted, and reinforces the notion that, where access to wisdom is concerned, we are more or less on our own. Only

Empedokles resorts to the traditional Muse, and this is a sign of compromise and cultural conservatism. Rigorous analysis is to replace careless attributions to tradition (whether that of previous poets or of the Muses).

The philosophical rejection of the poets, however, goes beyond the reconfiguration of the Muses. Philosophers like Xenophanes, Herakleitos, Parmenides, and Plato construct their intellectual world as one opposed to the content and presentation of poetic tales. Poetic production of the Archaic period implied the use of myth. The tales of the epic poets, their *mythoi*, are filled with mythological matter. Public lyric performance (take Alkman, Stesikhoros, or Simonides) either narrated myths or relied on mythological exempla. Myth was not recognised as a universal narrative genre, but the world of the poets was a world of myth. When they were criticised, it was for their myths. Philosophers like Xenophanes and even Plato clearly realised that not all myths were harmful and might contain ethical truths. But they did think that most poets did not have the intellectual expertise to understand the true nature of the world; their productions could not, therefore, be trusted without their own philosophical supervision. The poets inhabited a different world from the philosophers, one that operated by different criteria. Their uncritical use of mythological material was taken as a sign of that dangerous difference. The story the philosophers tell implies no common ground between myth and philosophy, and stigmatises myth as irrational. Myth becomes the 'other', and the opposition that we know as *mythos* versus *logos*, or myth versus science and rationality is born. The opposition has been influential in the entire western reception of ancient Greek philosophy. This influence, however, risks blinding us to the important role played by myth in Greek philosophy, not just as a foil but as a mode of philosophical thought and presentation.

The interaction of myth and philosophy is, therefore, the second area that needs a more nuanced appreciation than has so far been the case. One might have expected that after expressing disapproval of poetic models of inspiration and of the content of poetic works, philosophers would reject myth entirely. They do not do so, however. The presence of mythological elements such as Parmenides' goddess, or Plato's soul charioteer demands explanation. Explanation often tends towards one of two extremes. One might call the first approach the honeyed cup. On this reading, myth adds colour to dry, technical, and forbidding material. It softens the unforgiving contours of philosophy, but is essentially separable from the content of philosophical discourse. One could remove the mythological (and other troublesome literary) colour and be

left with pure and unmediated argument. Readings of this type often assume that any philosopher, given the chance, would prefer to speak only in strictly analytic terms. The addition of context, narrative, and features of style is seen either as slumming or as a regrettable lapse. The potential for myth or other literary features to have philosophical significance is ignored. A variant of this scenario might suppose that early philosophers felt compelled to adopt some of the practices of the poets in order to produce something that could be assimilated by audiences used to Homer and Simonides, and to appropriate the cultural authority of the poets. There is an important element of truth here, as we shall discover in Chapter 2, but it is not the whole truth. We must remember that the incompatibility of myth and philosophy is a reflection of the polemic self-representation of some early philosophers. There is every reason not to think in such stark oppositions, especially when one notes that there is a discontinuity between polemic rhetoric and less explicitly theorised literary practice. To explore this discontinuity is the task of this book.

A second approach is to concede that philosophical myth is not merely a reflex of literary ornamentation or audience expectation, but does have a philosophical role to play. Myth expresses what rational and scientific language cannot, and takes over where philosophy proper leaves off. This approach has elements of the mystical in it, and is attractive when applied to philosophers such as Parmenides and Plato, who believe in a transcendent world. Thus myth would communicate to an audience the transcendental character of the revelation granted to Parmenides, and would hint at the nature of the world inhabited by the Platonic forms and the disembodied soul. Of the two approaches, I find this the more congenial. It has the merit of acknowledging that mythological elements in philosophical works of philosophers cannot merely be stripped away to reveal an analytic core. Nevertheless, it does not go far enough. First, mysticism in its own terms is not enough for a philosopher. Unless mysticism can be grounded in an intellectual project, it cannot bear philosophical fruit. The rational grounding of mysticism is an important aspect of Plato's portrayal of Sokrates in the middle dialogues, as we shall see in Chapter 7. Second, the notion that philosophical myth begins where philosophy proper ends implies that myth and philosophy are two separable entities, but the chapters to follow will reveal that the boundary between myth and philosophy must continually be redrawn. We must deal not merely with a series of levels of linguistic truth, but with the imposition of one level upon another,

and the permeation of one level by material from another. Myth and philosophy are dynamic, not static categories. What does myth express that analytic language cannot, and why, and how? Where, precisely, does the problem lie? If we conclude that philosophy (a *rational* enterprise) ends where myth begins, we return to a view of myth as irrational and non-scientific; up rises the spectre of mythical thinking. Separable myth is not far from ornamental myth.

The following chapters will illustrate the dynamic interpenetration of myth and philosophy. As I suggested above, myth is an important medium for philosophers to think through problems of literary, social, and linguistic convention. What use are poetic production and technique in the philosophical world? What authority should we grant to societal beliefs, such as the democratic belief in the universal capacity for political decision-making? Questioning the status and applicability of mythological exempla plays a part in the fifth-century debate over nature and culture or convention. Thinking about the *place* of convention alerts us to the importance of context. The mythological world of the poets is the larger cultural context inside which early philosophy operated. Yet by appropriating myth for philosophical purposes, the philosophers considered here demand that we examine the interaction of embedded myth in a larger philosophical context. Indeed, one might say that this book is about the implications, for both philosophy and myth, of contextualising myth in a philosophical medium. The full meaning of the texts I shall examine becomes accessible when we appreciate the importance of the literary context in which argumentation is set. Details of style and narrative framing carry philosophical weight. When we focus on the specific problem of setting myth in a philosophical medium, it is even more important to consider how myth is framed. I argue that mythological elements often act as an embedded counterpoint to stricter forms of analysis. This counterpoint creates a tension, sometimes an incongruity, between the implications of the argument and the myth. Thus the implications of Parmenidean monism jar with the mythological frame in which his philosophy is set. The mythological display pieces of the sophists vaunt the power of rhetoric and the efficacy of sophistic moral education, although they speak about, or take on the persona of problematic mythological figures. Plato, too, sets his myths in contexts where their reception is problematic and where they highlight questions of the possibility of human knowledge and its expression. My approach here is in line with recent work on Plato, which has stressed the importance of details of setting

(and this must include the mythological as part of the literary) for understanding the message of the dialogues.<sup>3</sup>

Yet if tension and the potential for incongruity are all there is to the philosophical appropriation of myth, one might argue that an analytic approach, one which sees myth as ornament, is valid. The philosophical meaning of myth might be reduced to the incongruity. If we see elaborate jewellery on a nun, we are inclined to think it should not be there. We thus reinforce our preconceptions about what a nun should be. I think, however, that the significance of myth lies deeper. First, movement in and out of mythological material makes us aware of changes in perspective, as in Plato we move beyond the confines of one human lifetime and an earthbound body. It makes us look at our lives and our intellectual task differently, and it is precisely the disjunctive effect of myth that produces the vertigo necessary for converting earthly and prudential rationality into something more. Second, we shall repeatedly run across the problem that it is often quite difficult to identify where myth ends and philosophy 'proper' begins. Is Platonic recollection a myth? Do Parmenides' strictures about negation apply to the goddess who grants him his revelation? Whether 'mythologising' acts as a frame (as it does in Parmenides and perhaps in the *Republic*), or whether it is embedded in argument (like the transmigration of souls in the *Phaedo*), we find that it tends to spill over into places where we do not expect it. The space between myth and argument is slippery, and that is the point. Not that we cannot tell a proof from a Pegasus, but that discourse which takes us beyond our immediate bodily sensations must be carefully watched. If we are not conscious of what we are doing discursively, we have little chance of any lasting intellectual achievement.

The presence of mythological elements in philosophical works gives an author an opportunity to create a series of 'nests'. This nesting is at its most complex in Platonic material: we shall see how the *Timaeus* and *Critias* thematise the status of and the transition between myth, history, argument, history as myth, and myth as theory. That case is extreme, but less extreme instances of the intentional juxtaposition of different levels of discourse abound. At every point, the reader must investigate at what point on the continuum from myth to analysis she stands, and this investigation is philosophical. Its outcome matters because it affects the authority attributed to any given part of a philosophical text. The

<sup>3</sup> So, e.g. Ferrari 1987; Nightingale 1996. For the importance of the character of the Platonic interlocutor, see Blundell 1992; Blank 1993.

blurring of the boundaries between myth and argument means that we can never be absolutely certain of the validity of our argument. Even if it works in one context, it must, as Sokrates suggests in the *Phaedo*, be repeated again and again in different ones. Only then will we be as certain as humans can be. And that is not absolutely certain: Plato thinks that pure knowledge is extremely hard to obtain, both because of the nature of the human animal, and because language itself is an imperfect tool. The juxtaposition of *mythos* and *logos* keeps us aware of our human and linguistic weakness, as we struggle between one and the other. The Presocratics and sophists considered in this book are intensely conscious of this weakness, and negotiate it through the same studied juxtaposition. Certainly, myth in Plato is fully integrated with philosophical argument. Argument calls for myth not just as a foil, but as a means of reflecting on the truth status and possibility of philosophical analysis.

Philosophical myth, then, is rational, is deployed as a result of methodological reflection, and is a manifestation of philosophical concerns. I have suggested that these concerns focus on the nature and function of language, and the authority we give to an argument. Philosophical self-presentation builds upon a foundation of attacks on poets and their myths. These attacks are related to speculations about the accessibility of truth and the extent to which this is or can be expressed in language. The convergence of these two sets of concerns was inevitable; the poetic misuse of language was paradigmatic of a wider failure. The philosophers whom I will investigate want to succeed where their predecessors and contemporaries have failed. Yet they have reservations about whether success is possible. When we reject the mythological excesses of the poets, we bring up, at least implicitly, the question 'how can we tell what is true?'. Our criteria may be internal consistency in an argument, or consistency of an argument with observed facts, but what if we come up with a coherent picture that is nonetheless inaccurate? When the poets do this, we call their stories myths. Might not a philosophical theory be a myth in that sense? What absolute guarantee of validity can we bring to bear on a theory that would banish doubt? For most of the authors treated in this book, there is no absolute principle of authority within the world in which we live (although the sophists may assign relative authority to different cultural practices). There may, however, be a guarantor of truth outside the everyday world. If we can reach it (difficult though that may be), we may be in a position to have real knowledge. But how, then, would we communicate this knowledge? Language is a tool of this world, and is tied to its



incapacities. It cannot be taken for granted. The works studied in this book are themselves witnesses that it is difficult to tell whether we are producing a myth or an analysis. In this sense, myth is paradigmatic of the incapacities of language.

To juxtapose different types of discourse with differing levels of authority is, then, to problematise them, especially when the boundaries between the levels are uncertain. My method throughout this study will therefore be to map out these uncertain boundaries. This entails an important corollary for my treatment: I shall not examine philosophical argumentation for its own sake. My approach is literary rather than analytic (by analytic I mean a method that breaks down a philosophical text into a series of logical arguments), and will therefore treat argumentation as it is embedded in its literary matrix. Others are better suited than I to produce analytic readings, and there is no lack of scholarship along those lines. It is, however, the interaction of argument, myth and style of presentation that is of interest for my present purposes. By the same token, I shall not always explore every resonance of the myths I discuss. The mythological content of Empedokles' conception of the cosmos and its implications will receive short shrift. This will be even more obvious in the case of Plato, where the reader will find little discussion of the myths of the *Timaeus* and *Statesman* (for example) as cosmologies or theodicies. A full interpretation of Platonic myth would involve a detailed reading of each of the dialogues in which myth occurs. Only in the case of the *Phaedrus* have I attempted anything like this. Elsewhere I have tried to strike a balance between the necessity of a contextual reading and of following the mythological thread from dialogue to dialogue, and indeed, from author to author. Once again, this is because I am more interested in how an author, implicitly or explicitly, frames and comments on the myths he employs. This method should not be taken to imply that questions of content, whether philosophical, or mythical, or both, are unimportant, only that I have a different quarry in mind.

The authors with whom I will be concerned in the following chapters are: among the Presocratics, Xenophanes, Herakleitos, Parmenides (and to a lesser extent Empedokles); the sophists, in particular Gorgias and Protagoras; and Plato. In assigning to these thinkers a common perception of a set of problems and of the value of myth, I do not assert that these were the only problems of interest, to them or anyone else. This book is not an attempt to reissue early Greek philosophy or to give a complete interpretation of any Greek thinker. It is a partial account,

and I have been unashamed in focusing on those authors who lend themselves most readily to this type of analysis. It is notable that many of the authors I have chosen share a degree of kinship with the Eleatic school of philosophy that we connect with Parmenides. Xenophanes is said to have been the teacher of Parmenides (Aristotle *Met.* A5 986b), and Empedokles his associate (DK 31A7).<sup>4</sup> The relationship of the thought of Gorgias to that of Parmenides is well documented (Chapter 4). Even Plato can, to a degree, look to Parmenides as his philosophical father.<sup>5</sup> Common to all of them is the perception of a radical disjunction between the world as we see it and the world as it really is. Gorgias, as a sophist and a relativist, dismisses the latter as an irrelevance, but it is the very separation between appearance and reality that gives his theory of rhetoric its power. All think that the world of appearance is unstable. This, in turn dictates a certain attitude to language, which is put under great stress since it expresses the world of appearance, but must also be the tool by which reality, or truth, is revealed. Their use of myth is a mirror of that stress.

The chronological range of this study stretches from the end of the sixth to the middle of the fourth century BC. At the end of the sixth century we see the first critiques of the poetry of Homer and Hesiod, critiques which start the process of demarcating a realm of poetic mythology. This process is more fully developed in the work of Plato, who marks the finishing point of my investigation. We possess none of the popular works of Aristotle in which he might have made use of myth, and his surviving technical treatises hardly lend themselves to the type of interpretation practised here. Later philosophical uses of myth are closely tied to allegorising and would be the subject of a different book.

This study is divided into seven main chapters on theoretical background, the Presocratics, the sophists, and Plato. Chapter 2 is a consideration of some of the background issues that bear on the relationship of myth and philosophy. How should we define myth? Was there a shift from *mythos* to *logos*, and might such a shift be connected with the rise of literacy? What model can we use to explain the way some early philosophers configured themselves with respect to the poets? What issues underlie the creation of a philosophical use of myth, and how are they similar or different from modern theoretical concerns? I begin with a survey of the semantic field of the word *mythos* in Homer and Hesiod and

<sup>4</sup> On the relationship of Xenophanes and Elea, see Kirk et al. 1983: 165–6; Finkelberg 1990.

<sup>5</sup> *Th.* 183e5–184a2; *Soph.* 241d5, 242a2.

then examine the status of traditional tales before the rise of philosophy in light of archaic notions of truth. There is little indication that *mythos* had any negative connotations before the emergence of philosophical polemic, nor was the 'truth' that characterised poetic tales objective or verifiable. This situation changes with the first philosophers. Modern analysis of this change often speaks of the move from *mythos* to *logos*, but the equation of *mythos* with irrationality is oversimplified. Such equations are made because critics take over the terms of an ancient polemic against the tellers of mythological tales. It is preferable to adopt a model in which polemic against the poets is a result of a struggle by some early philosophers to define themselves through dismissing the poets as potential purveyors of wisdom.

The increasing impact of literacy on philosophical thought patterns helped transform the way mythical tales were regarded. As the great mass of oral myths began to take on a textual form, they could more easily be objectified and identified as something other than philosophy. Moreover, objectifying language in a text may have spurred reflection on its representative capabilities. An awareness of 'text', then, is an important step on the road that leads to the incorporation of myth in a philosophical setting. I attempt to formulate a definition of philosophical myth as a negative image of poetic myth. Embedded within the master genre of philosophy, it provides a counterpoint to philosophy's authoritative discourse. This effect of counterpoint has some resonance in modern deconstructionist concerns about the signifying power of language. As the chapter ends, I explore briefly the comparison with deconstruction as a way of clarifying by contrast the purpose of employing philosophical myth.

Chapter 3 brings the analysis from abstract considerations of definition and theory to the examination of individual Presocratic philosophers. I evaluate the rejection of poetic mythological material by Xenophanes and Herakleitos and study the nature of philosophy's polemic self-placement with regard to myth. Xenophanes and Parmenides in particular attempt to appropriate traditional poetic authority by reconstructing and transforming the relationship between poet and Muse. I relate the polemic philosophical stance towards the poets with the concerns of Xenophanes, Herakleitos, and Empedokles that their language should be a true reflection of their ideas. Worries about linguistic correspondence have clear implications for the place of myth, since it is myth, where, most often, language fails to correspond. Two responses to philosophical rejection that seek to save some truth value

for mythological poetry are allegory and rationalisation, which assert underlying correspondence between myth and truth. It is notable, however, that these methodologies fight their defensive battles in the arena defined by thinkers such as Xenophanes.

The second part of the chapter engages in a close reading of the surviving fragments of Parmenides' poem on the possible methods of intellectual enquiry. This poem consciously sets itself within a mythological framework of quest and revelation. There is, however, a tension between this framework and a philosophical conclusion that undermines both the literary format and the status of the philosophy as a product of language. Parmenides' argument concludes that only homogeneous Being exists, but this conclusion undermines the status of reader and narrator as individual beings. As Mackenzie (1982) remarks, a homogeneous universe rules out dialectical exchange. I argue that this tension stands out with particular clarity because of the presence of mythological elements that call attention to the status of the text as a literary and linguistic artefact. These elements emphasise how the requirements of genre, of text, of language itself, change the nature of philosophy and our perception of it. We cannot, therefore, argue that mythological presentation is a literary veneer that can be stripped away.

In Chapter 4, I appraise the use of the mythological tradition by some of the sophists and their contemporaries. The sophists, intellectuals and teachers, occupy a position that mediates between what we consider the realm of philosophy and that of the poets and other public performers. They thus provide an opportunity to observe myth interacting with both areas. Their concerns with language, and their manipulations of myth to express these concerns place them in the philosophical camp, but they also display their expertise in a more freewheeling and extrovert manner, as befits the performers of public display orations. The first part of the chapter focuses on the development of literary/critical and exegetical skills as a part of the process and result of sophistic education in the second half of the fifth century. One of the governing intellectual polarities of the time was that of nature and convention, *physis* and *nomos*. I argue that the poetic/mythological tradition was assimilated to the sphere of *nomos*; as a cultural convention it was the object of agonistic manipulation when speakers struggled to establish their intellectual expertise. In the latter part of the chapter I examine how epideictic mythological fantasies illustrate some of the themes at the heart of sophistic enquiry. Most of the sophists dismiss language as an expression of 'truth' or 'reality' and instead concentrate on the power of language

to create a world. It is, after all, the separation of truth from linguistic effectiveness that gives the orator his opportunities. Paradoxically, however, the very possibilities of linguistic manipulation raise the question of potential failure. This tension is articulated in mythological display orations such as Gorgias' *Defence of Palamedes*, and the paired speeches of Odysseus and Ajax by Antiphon, as mythological frame is juxtaposed with the rhetoric of the content.

Chapter 5 marks the transition from the sophists to Plato. It consists of an interpretation of Protagoras' mythological presentation of the origins of civilisation as we know it from Plato's *Protagoras*. I contend that the myth is genuinely Protagorean in content and that it represents the sophist's attempt to provide an axiomatic basis for the democratic society of Athens in the face of Socratic/Platonic criticism. Since it cannot be demonstrated in argument that Athenian political practice is rational, Protagoras must disguise this fact in myth. Yet this discourse exists also in a larger Platonic context, and much of the dialogue consists of the Socratic exposure of Protagoras' mythological ruse. Plato has Sokrates pick up on some aspects of the myth, particularly the role of Prometheus, and transforms them for his own purposes. Here we see the beginnings of Platonic mythological practice.

The remaining three chapters of the book are devoted to Plato, and stress the integration of Platonic myth and argument. Like Parmenides, Plato uses the problematic status of myth to raise questions about the relationship of language and reality. Myth in Plato reflects and acknowledges the two major limitations within which philosophy operates, those imposed by the nature of language (the weakness and imprecision of language entails that it is difficult to express the intelligible realm in words) and of human existence (the embodied soul cannot attain direct contemplation of the really real). The inherent symbolism of myth renders it an ideal way of drawing attention to these difficulties. Chapter 6 ('The range of Platonic myth') sets the stage by stressing, once again, the importance of context for an appreciation of Platonic myth. Neither *mythos* nor *logos* is a univalent category, and I examine some instances where myth seems to lie in the eye of the beholder. I distinguish three categories of Platonic myth: traditional, educational, and philosophical, and demonstrate that argumentative context affects the type of truth attributed to mythological material. The range of the word *mythos* in the Platonic corpus extends from Homer's lying tales about the gods to teleology, cosmology, and other technical theorising. *Mythos* is associated with leisure, play, and childishness – but so is philosophy. Even

the most technical dialectic is still bound up in the strategies of language, and is still a game compared to the internal realisation of truth. Just as the uses of language range from the most ignorant and mundane to the most austere and technical, so does the Platonic usage of *mythos*, which thus becomes a figure for language itself, with all its triumphs and shortcomings.

Platonic myths of the middle period, concerning the soul and the afterlife, are evaluated in Chapter 7. These myths, marked by the exercise of reserve and self-qualification, present a synoptic, ethically-oriented, view of reality. Sokrates seems to have instinctive knowledge of certain ethical truths (his 'divine voice' and his 'recollective' insight replace Muse-based inspiration), but before they can legitimately take their place in philosophical discussion and be accepted by his interlocutors, they must be justified by argument. We find a self-conscious shifting of modes between discursive levels that are more or less mythological, and this shifting is itself the object of philosophical enquiry. Discussion of the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* shows that, while myth must not replace argument, it can culminate it. It can, moreover, compensate for, and help to underline, certain contextual difficulties, whether those difficulties are the intransigence of the interlocutor, the imminence of death, or the problematic incarceration of the immortal soul in a mortal body. In the *Phaedrus*, the rhetorical status of myth, dialectic, and dialogue is thematised. I see this dialogue as the end of a middle period trend towards greater methodological self-consciousness. In spite of Sokrates' implications to the contrary, we are shown how and why myth is demanded by the argument, especially when we are dealing with the incursion of the soul into the metaphysical sphere.

Chapter 8 deals with myth in the later dialogues. Myths of the soul are less in evidence, although the cosmological myths of the *Statesman* and *Timaeus* cover some of the same ground. Dialogues such as the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus* reflect a change in methodological focus as Plato explores the possibilities of technical precision in language. Concomitant with the change is a transformation in the way Plato uses *mythos*-vocabulary; it can now refer to philosophical theory and argument. This usage in turn provokes questions about the truth status of philosophical accounts, and reveals philosophical analysis as a constructed quasi-narrative with societal and literary implications (as we see particularly in the *Timaeus* and *Critias*). Plato has his interlocutors explore the limits of narrative, both mythological and philosophical, and we discover that, in the end, it is almost impossible to distinguish a

sufficiently advanced philosophical myth from a philosophical theory. All language, even theoretical language, is a story that interprets reality. We must treat both myth and theory with the appropriate reserve.

There is not, then, a single uniform approach to myth on the part of the philosophers and other thinkers of the late sixth, fifth, and fourth centuries. No sensible person would expect it. But there is, if not uniformity, a certain similarity of approach based on a common perception that myth is paradigmatically divorced from accurate correspondence with the truth (whatever the truth is perceived to be). The fruits of this perception vary, as philosophies vary, but the utility of myth persists. *Mythos* and *logos* are constructed as opposites in early Greek philosophy, and the opposition has always been a stimulating one. Its heuristic convenience should not, however, discourage us from exploring the ways in which it breaks down. The contrived interaction of *mythos* and *logos* gives us valuable insights into philosophical method and provides some clues about how the effectiveness of philosophical discourse may have been perceived. This is true even in the case of the sophists, not usually regarded as philosophers in the modern sense.

When Goody critiqued the structuralist analysis of myth, he remarked that it fell short by not focusing on the individual act of creation. All myth is at some point created by an individual who may have a particular gift for verbal arts.<sup>6</sup> Goody was talking of the manipulation of myth in a pre-literate society, but his point is applicable here. It is relevant to the study both of philosophy and of mythology to return the focus to the creators of individual myths. Philosophy imposes and profits from the textualisation of Greek mythology, but it also engages in some of the most creative myth-making of the fifth and fourth centuries.

<sup>6</sup> Goody 1977: 24.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Theoretical issues*

Specifying the function of myth in early Greek philosophy is a perilous enterprise. What is myth? What is philosophy? How can we recognise philosophical myth? These categories are retrospective impositions on the competitive intellectual world of the sixth to fourth centuries BC. In order to define terms, we must realise that several interpretative problems overlap. First and most basic, there is a problem concerning what we mean and what the Greeks meant, when they used the word ‘myth’ (*mythos*). Second, there are problems concerning what conditions helped to bring about the rise of what we call philosophy, and the nature of the intellectual project involved. Third, we must investigate what moves are involved in the representation of the rise of philosophy, and how philosophy is related to the larger worlds of poetic discourse and mythology. This last set of questions is crucial because the formation of a specifically philosophical mythology is a result of the conceptual exclusion of poetic mythological discourse by early philosophers. This exclusion has influenced subsequent generations and has led to modern misconceptions of the relationship between philosophy and myth in ancient philosophical authors. Since early philosophers reject poetic claims to seriousness, we have often assumed that mythological elements within philosophy are ornamental bows in the direction of an obsolete thought world. We ignore the possibility that myth may serve a philosophical purpose. A consideration of the above three sets of questions will allow us to isolate a use of myth that is truly philosophical precisely because it expresses the tension between poetic/mythological and philosophical systems as that tension is conceived by philosophers.

My examination of philosophical myth in this book suggests that it is characterised by a striking inversion of many of the qualities we associate with myth. Burkert defined myth as a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance,<sup>1</sup> but this

<sup>1</sup> Burkert 1979: 23.



formulation proves inadequate to describe the phenomenon of philosophical myth. The myths we shall see in Parmenides and Plato are not traditional even though they may contain traditional elements. Nor is their reference secondary or partial. On the contrary, they point directly to issues that are of philosophical importance (and hence are of collective importance only in the sense that the philosopher believes them to be crucial to the intellectual health of the community). Issues of tradition bring to light other aspects of philosophical myth. These narratives are profoundly literary; they come into existence only after the establishment of literacy and receive their first embodiment as a literary text. They are created for a particular philosophical context and remain tied to that context; they are an embedded subgenre and are freer of tradition than the myths used by Homer and Hesiod. We shall see why this must be so: after repudiating the tales of the poets, philosophers could hardly proceed to adapt tales of the Trojan War. Philosophical tales are often newly invented because they have a point to make that does not fit into previous narrative formats, but most importantly because they must demonstrate how to employ myth correctly. That they are different is an implicit criticism of the tales told by the poets.

Most critical, however, is that because of the early history of Greek philosophy as we shall survey it in this chapter and the next, the subgenre of myth in philosophy must always stand at odds with the larger genre. Whether myth is a framing element for doctrine, as in the case of Parmenides, or an inset in dialectic, as in Plato, there is always a tension between myth and a hostile philosophical context which will itself be productive of philosophical insight. Philosophical myth is non-traditional, textual, and subordinate to a hostile context. It cannot claim the power that inheres in the larger genre of philosophical language. This powerlessness attests the reconfiguration of the sources of linguistic authority after the rise of philosophy. We shall see that before the Presocratics the world of myth was characterised by undemonstrable truth and poetic authority; the word *mythos* similarly connoted authoritative, efficacious and performative speech. In the aftermath of the first philosophers myth lost its positive connotations. No longer authoritative or efficacious, it remained undemonstrable, but in a trivial rather than a transcendent sense. Its positive attributes were appropriated by philosophical discourse, and the criterion of demonstrability was attached to the notion of truth. Myth in philosophy exists, quite precisely, as a shadow of its former self, on sufferance and admitted only in a reformed

persona. This very powerlessness is suggestive, however. As a reminder of the transience of authority in discourse, myth provides an unsettling counterpoint to its master, philosophy. Down but not out, it keeps alive the question of the correspondence of language and reality that caused it to be rejected in the first place. When philosophical discourse claims to be authoritative and to present language that corresponds to the way things are, myth ensures that we do not take too optimistic a view of the potential success of this enterprise.

These opening chapters, then, tell a story of philosophical rejection and self-positioning that turns into appropriation and exploitation, a long-lasting dynamic that energises Greek philosophy down to the time of Plato. In order to tell this story we must return to the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter. The first step in this ground-clearing exercise is to review what ‘myth’ meant to the Greeks in the Archaic and Classical periods. It will emerge that the Greek word *mythos* retained a fairly neutral connotation later than has sometimes been claimed; it is only in Plato (as the final chapters will show) that *mythos* comes close to having a consistently negative sense. Even then, we shall need to qualify this claim. Since *mythos* does not at first have the same implications as does our modern use of the word ‘myth’, it will also be necessary to describe the ancient attitude to what we usually call myth/mythology (the traditional stories transmitted by poets like Homer). I shall suggest that ancient and modern uses of the word begin to converge towards the end of the fifth century. The common element is authoritative speech, and it is this authority that explains why poetry and myth posed such a challenge to emergent philosophy.

On a basic level, *mythos* is merely speech.<sup>2</sup> In Homer, as Martin has shown, *mythos* is used to designate a specific kind of speech. *Mythos* in the *Iliad* is closely associated with the speaker’s thought: ‘a speech-act indicating authority, performed at length, usually in public, with a focus on full attention to every detail’. Using the terminology of Prague School linguistics, Martin suggests that *mythos* is the marked member of the pair whose unmarked member is *epos* (‘word’, ‘utterance’). *Mythos* denotes not just words in general, but is a semantically restricted term for an authoritative speech-act. Thus the term *mythos* may be applied to the genres of discourse embedded in the speeches of the *Iliad*, and Homer’s heroes are analysed as poetic performers and stylists.<sup>3</sup> I cite three examples. *Mythos* is the word used to describe Agamemnon’s

<sup>2</sup> Hofmann 1922: 28–49; Detienne [1981]/1986: 46–51.

<sup>3</sup> Martin 1989: 12–16, 30, 42.

blustering rejection of the pleas of the old priest Khryses (1.388), Diomedes' public rebuke of Agamemnon's faintheartedness (9.51), and Achilles' angry rejection of Agamemnon's offer of compensation (9.431). From an early stage, then, *mythos* is felt to denote a special category of speech that carries implications of power and efficacy and is related to the special powers of the creative poetic word. Philosophy will seek to appropriate for its own creative intellectual project this aura of authority and effectiveness, and it will do so by defining itself in opposition to the world of poetic speech and associated mythological subject matter.

In Hesiod, *mythos* has a neutral meaning, and is only negative when given a negative qualifier.<sup>4</sup> Attempts to argue that it had the connotation 'fiction, lie', and thus that the negative implications of *mythos* are pre-philosophic, are based on slender and ambiguous evidence. It is true that when Hesiod in the *Works and Days* wishes to tell the 'myth' of the metals, for which he vouches (106–7), he labels his story not a *mythos*, but a *logos*,<sup>5</sup> and that to express the concept of telling the truth, he uses the formula ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι (*Theog.* 28) as opposed to the common Homeric formula ἀληθέα μυθήσασθαι. Does this bespeak a tendency in Hesiod to suppress *mythos* and its derivatives when the poet wants to emphasise the truthful aspect of his speech?<sup>6</sup> Besides being an argument from silence, this hypothesis is based on a statistical sample too small to permit broad generalisation. The formula ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι occurs only once in Hesiod, as does the analogous phrase ἐτήτυμα μυθησαίμην, 'I would speak genuine things' (*Op.* 10), where a *mythos*-derivative is used to express the concept of truth and accuracy. It is preferable to confine ourselves to the more conservative proposition that *mythos* in Hesiod is not assignable to any specific position in a semantic field, nor is it viewed as intrinsically deceptive. The Hesiodic evidence is indecisive, while Homeric epic suggests a conception of *mythos* that, while not ethically or veridically determined, has connotations of power and performance.

Even in the early philosophical authors (Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Empedokles) *mythos* has no negative connotations. When, then, does a negative force begin to be asserted? Pindar and Herodotos have been

<sup>4</sup> Like the 'crooked *mythoi*' at *Works and Days* 194. <sup>5</sup> Detienne [1981]/1986: 47.

<sup>6</sup> Nagy 1982: 779 (followed by Martin 1989: 13). Nagy notes, however, the phrase ἐτήτυμα μυθησαίμην at *Op.* 10. The text of *Theog.* 28 is disputed. While γηρύσασθαι is the reading of the papyri and some manuscripts, μυθήσασθαι is also attested. The former is clearly the *lectio difficilior* and the latter must be a reminiscence of the Homeric formula (West 1966: 163). Nevertheless, the variation is notable.

suggested as likely candidates. As was the case with *mythos* in Hesiod, the case rests mainly on an argument from silence. The word is rarely used in these authors and the evidence is difficult to interpret, but it does not allow us to say that *mythos*-vocabulary is predominantly a term of censure.<sup>7</sup> We must make a distinction between occasional negative implications, and systematic characterisation; the former are present, but there is no sign of a systematic distinction between lying *mythoi* and other types of discourse. *Mythos* is used three times in Pindaric epinician poetry. Perhaps the most unequivocal example is *Nem.* 7.23, where *sophia* (here best translated as ‘cleverness’) deceives by leading people astray with *mythoi*. The primary reference is not poetic tales (the *mythoi* are probably crafty speeches uttered by Odysseus as he sought to win the arms of Achilles). The word is used negatively, but not technically.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, *Pyth.* 4.298 provides an example of the verb *mythesasthai* being used in an exceptionally positive context, where the object of the verb is the poet’s own art.<sup>9</sup> The two occurrences of the *myth-* root in a compound adjective divide evenly into one negative and one positive usage.<sup>10</sup>

Herodotos uses *mythos* only twice, both times in his account of Egypt in Book 2. At 2.23 it refers to a rejected hypothesis concerning the reason for the Nile flood (the one that connects it with the river Okeanos, a fabulous river that Herodotos considers the invention of a poet such as Homer). At 2.45 it refers to a ‘foolish’ tale the Greeks tell about the attempted sacrifice of Herakles in Egypt. These *mythoi* are both what a modern reader might reasonably call a ‘myth’. Both of them are distinguished in the historian’s eyes by a lack of judgement. The creator of the Nile hypothesis ‘has no proof’ and is relying on poetic geography, and the Greeks who attribute human sacrifice to the Egyptians in ignorance of their true sacrificial practice speak carelessly. These are *mythoi* to be rejected. Nevertheless, one would search in vain in Herodotos for a systematic classification of which kinds of tales are *mythoi*, or for a development of a scientific conception of *logos*. All three cited opinions on the flooding of the Nile are considered judgements, as are Herodotos’

<sup>7</sup> As suggested by Detienne [1981]/1986: 46–7.

<sup>8</sup> In the other two occurrences of *mythoi* in Pindaric epinician, *Ol.* 1.29 and *Nem.* 8.33, the word is specified as negative by being associated with qualifiers such as ‘crafty’ or ‘adorned with variegated lies’.

<sup>9</sup> ‘He could narrate (μυθήσασθαι) what kind of spring of ambrosial words he found when he was entertained recently in Thebes’.

<sup>10</sup> *Ol.* 13.10: ‘Hybris, bold-speaking (θρασύμυθον) mother of Satiety’; *Pyth.* 9.76: ‘great excellences always generate many stories’ (πολύμυθοι).

own conclusions. Moreover, the historian's frequent use of *logos* in the sense of 'story', 'narrative' is instructive. When narrating two different versions of Helen's arrival in Troy, he calls them both *logoi*, even the version he does not believe is true (2.116). Later in the book he presents two versions of the death of the pharaoh Mycerinus' daughter (2.131); the rejected version is again called a *logos*, and Herodotos' disdain for the sources of this version is even more marked than his disapproval of the authors of the *mythoi* cited above.<sup>11</sup> He uses the word *logos* for all kinds of traditions that we would call myths. It is doubtful, then, that we can assign any programmatic intent to the Herodotean usage of *mythos*, and it would be surprising if we could. Herodotos himself claims no systematic method and applies no rigid criteria to the selection of his material. He trusts his own reasoned judgement and sometimes his autopsy, but would rather include than exclude. He is not above using Homer as an historical source, and indeed seems to see both Homer and Hesiod as being akin to religious researchers (2.53). Given such a practice, it is probably over-optimistic to discern a systematic gesture of exclusion in Herodotos with regard to *mythos* and/or myth. The absence of the word *mythos* is interesting but cannot be pressed.

Herodotos' successor certainly started a new phase of more ostentatiously scientific and objective historiography. Yet even Thucydides is not above using Homer as a source and relating tales that we would call myth (so, for example, the digression on Teres and Tereus at 2.29). Thucydides' famous condemnation of the *μυθῶδες*, the 'mythical element' (1.22), seems to mark a new severity in the treatment of *mythos*, but there is some doubt about what precisely the historian is referring to.<sup>12</sup> Thucydides does make grand and excluding gestures, and does distrust poetic narrative, in a manner that reminds us of some early philosophers. The designation of the semantic range of *mythos* was not his concern. What we end up with, then, is much silence and some indications of negative connotations, but no programmatic association of *mythos* with lying speech or even with what we would call myth. Further developments have to await the arrival of Plato.

If *mythos* does not mean 'myth', what can be said about the status of the traditional tales that we call myths in the period before the rise of philosophy? They were characterised by variety, fluidity, and by being embedded in the agonistic ethos that was so marked a feature of Greek

<sup>11</sup> Compare also 3.3, 4.77, 7.214, 8.119.

<sup>12</sup> Flory 1990: 194 concludes that we should interpret *μυθῶδες* in 1.22 as 'patriotic stories in particular and sentimental chauvinism in general'.

discourse. The competitive nature of early Greek poetry scarcely needs documenting. Poets engaged in frequent mythological innovation and new versions of old tales constantly appeared.<sup>13</sup> The excellence of a poet was defined by his ability to generate superior versions of any story; there was no canonical version of a tale. Hesiod is willing to revise his own genealogy of Strife (as presented at *Theog.* 225 f.) in the *Works and Days*. There is not one Strife after all, but a good one (producing emulation) and a bad one (11–26).<sup>14</sup> The most famous of such revisions is the ‘Palinode’ of Stesikhoros (*PMG* 192), which begins by declaring that the version of the myth that has Helen go to Troy is false. The ‘hush passages’ in Pindar, where the poet rejects an ethically unacceptable version of a myth (e.g. *Ol.* 1.52; *Ol.* 9.35–41) are examples of the same phenomenon.

Yet the recognition of, even the insistence upon, the possibility that a poetic account may be false, does not at first cause any generalised disquiet about the validity of mythological accounts and their poetic formulations. Some recent modern scholarship has suggested that passages such as *Theog.* 27–8 (where the Muses say to Hesiod that they know how to say many falsehoods that are like genuine things, but also how to proclaim true things) raise the possibility that all poetic representation may be a ‘lie’ to some extent.<sup>15</sup> This critique, although suggestive, presupposes a developed and self-conscious conception of categories of truth and falsity that may not have been available to Hesiod. Variety was simply a function of competitive genres. A poet may claim that his account is superior to a predecessor’s or competitor’s; none of this raises questions about the truth status of myth, or of poetry, as a whole. Early poets had no global concept of ‘myth’; they simply manipulated individual myths. This distinction bears emphasising: until the rise of philosophy, there was no ‘mythology’.<sup>16</sup> When Hesiod’s Muses speak of ‘false things like genuine ones’ (*Theog.* 27), they (and the poet) are not claiming that myth/poetry as a form of discourse may be true or false, but that individual mythological accounts may be. Hesiod’s, of course, are true, that is, superior to those of his predecessors.

The notion of truth that emerges from Hesiod’s *Theogony* is not familiar to a modern audience. Our notions of the criteria by which

<sup>13</sup> Griffith 1990: 188, 196–200.

<sup>14</sup> This distinction may be programmatic for poetic competitiveness. Whereas Strife in the *Theogony* is the parent of ‘Falsehoods and Words and Disputations’ (229), the good Strife of the *Works and Days* is not associated with falsehood. Neither, therefore, is poetic emulativity.

<sup>15</sup> Cited and discussed in Ferrari 1988.

<sup>16</sup> For this distinction, see especially Detienne [1981]/1986 passim.

truth is judged have been moulded by the very philosophers who aimed to deconstruct poetic authority. Just as early Greek poetry did not abstractly conceptualise its subject matter as 'mythology', so it would have had no formal criteria by which to decide that poetry is false or fictional. Myths did not function according to criteria of truth and falsity except insofar as 'true' meant 'valid' and 'memorable'. Scientific criteria of confirmation or refutation were not applied, for they did not yet exist. The secondary literature on archaic Greek notions of truth (*aletheia*) is vast, especially since Heidegger's influential treatment of the subject. Heidegger's 'objective' view of truth as 'unhiddenness' has gradually given way to a more 'subjective' evaluation, like that of Cole, in which truth is seen as a quality of 'unforgetfulness' inhering in scrupulous reporting. As Cole has pointed out, early notions of *aletheia* centre on the relationship between speaker and audience; it is not until the rise of philosophy that a primarily 'objective' sense for the word arises, as thinkers 'beginning with Parmenides . . . assume that the truly real must display the same qualities as the content of strict and careful . . . discourse'.<sup>17</sup> On this reading, 'truth and method, the what and how of a given communication . . . are . . . combined'.<sup>18</sup> This focus on the significance of context and transmission in determining the operation of truth is an important underpinning of this study.

The nature of archaic truth is tied to the importance of the archaic poet, as Detienne has demonstrated. Before the rise of philosophy myth belonged to a special realm of undemonstrable truth that was the province of poets, sages, kings, and seers. The world of myth and the poet was defined by *aletheia* (conceived of not as the opposite of falsity but of forgetfulness), and this world was closely akin to that of the prophet and king. Discourse arising out of this world was sacred and mantic, and truth was asserted, not demonstrated: if a poet was inspired his word was characterised by truth.<sup>19</sup> Truth can be understood only in relation to its religious system: not as a concept but as an aspect of praise and sovereignty. If the poet is indeed a 'master of truth' when he forms his mythical accounts, this is not because he avoids falsity but because he delivers a certain form of effective speech. After the Archaic period, speech became laïcised and the nature of truth was transformed. Now it was a matter of a formal apparatus of proof, and the ambiguity of speech

<sup>17</sup> Cole 1983: 25.

<sup>18</sup> Cole 1983: 7 (with references), 12. For a recent (but restrictive) examination of the problem of defining *aletheia*, see Pratt 1993: 17–22.

<sup>19</sup> Detienne 1967: 6, 27.

(and myth) became a starting point for a reflection on language as an instrument that affects both reality and others.<sup>20</sup>

Another, fruitful, way of putting this is to employ Veyne's idea that a plurality of programmes of truth existed for the Greeks of the Archaic period such that one could believe both in the truth of the legendary world and in the truth of everyday reality. If pressed, a Greek would acknowledge that these two worlds did not function in the same way, but 'a kind of lethargy' would prevent people from seeing the difference between them.<sup>21</sup> It did not occur to them that the world of myth was incompatible with their own experience, and this attitude to myth changed only with the rise of scientific enquiry, which expressly offered false and true as alternatives.<sup>22</sup> We need not attribute the idea of multiple truths to a primitive or pre-logical mentality. Such judgements are often the result of an imposition of modern category distinctions that force issues foreign to the original context, and as we shall see, these distinctions rest upon polemical categories created by the Greeks themselves. This is particularly true of such concepts as myth, science, magic, and metaphor.<sup>23</sup> The distinction between *mythos* and *logos* is a function of the rise of philosophical self-consciousness.

Several points arising from these arguments need stressing. First, that poetic speech is associated with authority, effectiveness, and memorability. Second, that transforming this model of poetic authority leads to more systematic and defined categories of truth and falsehood and to reflection on the ambiguity of language. Third, that the mythological tales which form much of the content of poetry exist in a different programme of truth from that of everyday reality, and this programme is associated with the magico-religious properties of the poetic word. It follows that the mythological programme and its associated truth will be regarded as authoritative, effective, and memorable. Here is an essential link between what we call Greek 'myth' and the semantic unit *mythos*. For as we have seen, *mythos* is characterised by the same authority and efficacy and is linked with poetic performance. Such a link is not made explicitly in the early sources. Nevertheless, it is significant that the realms of myth and *mythos* possess like qualities and can both be associated with poetic speech. Early philosophers attempt to divest poetic speech of these qualities and appropriate its aura of effective and

<sup>20</sup> Detienne 1967: 51, 103, 79.

<sup>21</sup> Veyne [1983]/1988: 17–18. Cf. Burkert 1979: 24, 'Mythical thinking takes as operators neither class-inclusion nor the true/false dichotomy, but actions or sequences of actions.'

<sup>22</sup> Veyne [1983]/1988: 24. <sup>23</sup> Lloyd 1990: 7–8.



truthful speech. They demarcate a realm of poetic and mythological discourse by way of self-definition. Subsequent writers begin to apply the word *mythos* to this realm; the distinctions are developed and formalised by Plato. This convergence between the word *mythos* and the concept of myth operates through the emergence of the first philosophy, which identifies poetic and mythological discourse as a system standing in opposition to its own programme of truth. The breakdown of the poetic system thus initiated has, however, implications that reach even into the philosophical realm. A view of poetic speech that sees it as manipulating/manipulative raises general questions about the reliability of language, questions that philosophy will have to face.

#### TEXTUALISATION AND THE RISE OF PHILOSOPHY

So far, I have been talking about the rise of philosophy and its relationship to the world of the poets as though these phenomena were self-evident. It is time to turn to the second set of questions posed at the beginning of the chapter, questions which centred on the conditions that helped to bring about the rise of philosophy. For the purposes of the present study, I shall be concentrating on the role of literacy in encouraging philosophical self-consciousness. The advent of literacy facilitated the development of abstraction and led to a conception of poetry and poetic wisdom as a text that could be studied and criticised. Textualisation is one of the most important threads running through this book. The textualisation of mythological material led first to criticism, then to the opportunity to manipulate and play against this material considered as a fixed entity. The development of allegorical interpretation and of sophistic mythological epideixis are rooted in the same phenomenon. Plato will react against the authority of the cultural texts of Homer and Hesiod. It is no accident that philosophical abstraction and the critique of poetic discourse are thus connected. The intellectual project of philosophy implicates itself from the start with the manufacture and interpretation of texts. So it is that the philosophical manipulation of myth will be a profoundly literary phenomenon. Yet the most important result of textualisation and criticism is the realisation that words and reality need not, and often do not, correspond. While such a realisation may lead to a striving for accuracy, it also injects an element of uncertainty into even philosophical discourse. Although they develop their own methodologies and truth criteria, philosophers sometimes threaten to implicate themselves in their own critique.

The precise extent of writing's influence on the rise of philosophy is disputed. One standard model was proposed by Goody, who redefined the traditional dichotomy between primitive and irrational man versus rational and scientific man, the contrast that has often been assimilated to that between *mythos* and *logos*.<sup>24</sup> He re-evaluated this contrast as one between oral and traditional as opposed to literate societies, and suggested that, while purely oral societies are not by any means devoid of rationality or intellectualism, the contribution of the individual thinker is swallowed up to become part of collective knowledge. Although oral societies do not necessarily forbid scepticism or critiques of social beliefs, there is no mechanism by which a sceptical or critical tradition can perpetuate itself. On the other hand, the invention of writing allows a different kind of inspection of expressed belief and enables the scrutiny of discourse as something separate from the writer. This objectification of the text is likely to stimulate, in turn, increased critical activity, leading to a modern version of science and rationality. Administrative and lexical lists enforce the ordering of items and the creation of boundaries; categories are made more visible and abstract. Classificatory lists enforce binary choices, for items must belong in one category or another.<sup>25</sup> The increase in skills of abstract categorisation is accompanied by a different attitude to the relationship between words and reality. In a traditional society, words and reality are intrinsically bound together, but the objectification of text can lead to a realisation that words and reality may vary independently.<sup>26</sup>

The development of a continuous sceptical and critical tradition, the experience of discourse as an object (and the critical activity that such an experience generates), the need for more abstract and clear-cut categorisation, and the awareness of a possible misfit between language and the world it claims to represent, are all features that we find represented in the early philosophers to be examined in this chapter and the next. We need not, however, propose that literacy, by its very nature, encourages the development of logic and rationality. Such a model (known as the 'autonomous' model) is technologically deterministic, but it is preferable to adopt an 'ideological' model, in which the effects of literacy in any culture are tied to the influence of social customs

<sup>24</sup> Goody and Watt 1963; Goody 1977.

<sup>25</sup> Goody 1977: 27–37, 81–6, 104–6. The temptation to think of Parmenides here is irresistible. His demand that all mortal thinking and speech make a choice between two mutually exclusive alternatives, 'is' and 'is not', transports us immediately to the rigours of binary category choice.

<sup>26</sup> Goody 1977: 41.

and beliefs.<sup>27</sup> It is context that will explain the peculiarities of the Greek evidence, such as the difference between Greek and Egyptian mathematics, or why some ancient Greek cities had writing but no apparent intellectual revolution.<sup>28</sup>

It is clear, then, that the deterministic aspects of Goody's approach need modification. This does not entail, as has been claimed, that we must abandon claims that literacy influenced the development of a more scientific mentality in Archaic Greece. It is important to differentiate claims to a new objectivity and rationality from the actual appearance of these qualities. Goody, for example, suggested that writing down epic texts led people to question their truth and to distinguish myth and history. It is not necessary for Goody to prove that the first historians *actually were* more objective and rational, as they claimed.<sup>29</sup> They may not have been particularly objective and were certainly as ideologically embedded as the next person, but it is the appearance of self-conscious methodological claims that is important.<sup>30</sup> We may still speak of a change in conceptual apparatus in dealing with the past, an idea that one should compare different versions from different informants in order to arrive at more accurate knowledge (although the content of the conclusion drawn will be influenced by ideology). Similarly, the profusion of poetic tales and their reification in textual form may have encouraged critical comparison and the development of new criteria for testing accuracy, even though the 'truth' to which the early philosophers compared the tales of the poets was polemically generated and ideologically embedded.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, even if literacy is not the inevitable cause of a rise in rationality, one may still propose that in the Greek case the availability of alphabetic writing was, along with contemporary practice in debate and polemic, a major factor in the rise of a philosophical consciousness. It is the availability of writing, rather than its widespread diffusion among the population, that is significant. It may well be that the effects of literacy were restricted to an educated elite until the time of Aristotle.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, that tiny educated elite began to do what we now call philosophy, and

<sup>27</sup> Thomas 1989: 25; cf. Street 1984. <sup>28</sup> Lloyd 1987: 73–8; Thomas 1992: 20.

<sup>29</sup> Pace the arguments of Street 1984: 53–6. <sup>30</sup> Lloyd 1990: 15.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. the valuable remarks of Ferrari 1984: 201–2 on the possibility that Herakleitos' critique of Homer, Hesiod, Pythagoras, and Hekataios (DK22B40) rests upon a textual knowledge of these authors. Street 1984: 57 comments that a critical comparison of statements can easily be envisaged in an oral context. But the objects of Herakleitos' critique are from different places and times. Surely one can admit that the circulation of texts in written form facilitated and encouraged such critical comparison.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas 1992: 20.

saw the possible implications of the textualisation of speech. For them written text acted as a spur to greater conceptual abstraction and meditation on the nature of language. The time during which Greece developed from a relatively less literate to a relatively less oral society (the Archaic and Classical periods) coincides with the emergence of the concepts of mythology, philosophy, and rhetoric that finds its culmination in Plato. The relationship between these two developments is causal.

Let us now consider the ways in which emergent literacy may have prompted the rise of Presocratic philosophy and led to investigation of the uses of language and polemic against traditional mythological and poetic narrative.<sup>33</sup> It has been suggested that objectification of a text through writing, and the consciousness of separation that this brings, will encourage the writer to view the text as a system and then to search for a comprehensive system in the world around him. Once conceived, the system will encourage the Presocratic philosopher to create a more impersonal and abstract language to communicate his vision. Whether or not textual systems stimulate one's desire to find system in the natural world, it seems likely that textual objectification will encourage speculation on the nature of language as text. Havelock finds evidence of this in 'an insistent polemic against language currently in use' on the part of the Presocratics (we shall return to the details of early philosophical polemic in the next chapter).<sup>34</sup> The fragments of Xenophanes and Herakleitos are paradigmatic. In his critique of anthropomorphism, Xenophanes condemns the human idea that the gods have the same kind of speech as we do (DK 21B14). Herakleitos mounts an even more thorough attack on the way people talk and think and on the poets who are their teachers (so, e.g., DK 22B104). Common to both is the realisation that language is not guaranteed by nature and cannot be considered an unexamined given.

Two aspects of Havelock's thesis are important for us here: his focus on Presocratic dissatisfaction with available linguistic resources, and his observation that, from Xenophanes to Empedokles, error of thought is measured in error of language. He envisions a straightforward procedure in which the Presocratics polemicise because they need a new

<sup>33</sup> It is impossible to prove that the pre-literate Greeks did not philosophise in fact. Yet even if they had the linguistic resources that would enable them to express a system and raise philosophical questions (Adkins 1983: 211–20), we should remember Goody's point that the rise of a scientific and rationalistic (in the modern sense) tradition is dependent not just on the potential for scepticism and critique, but on the transmission of a continuous critical tradition of a sort unlikely to be found in oral cultures.

<sup>34</sup> Havelock 1983: 21, 15. I take no position here on the complicated issue of whether the Presocratics mentioned composed orally or in writing. For a good survey of the problems involved, see Ferrari 1984.

abstract vocabulary to express a new vision of system. This vocabulary will escape the defects of *mythos*, that is, narrative formulation, and will be able to relate abstract facts rather than tell stories. Herakleitos attacks men for failing to use the kind of language he thinks they should, and this criticism is extended to their mode of consciousness. Parmenides and Empedokles also devote energy to pointing out the errors in people's thought and the concomitant errors in language.<sup>35</sup> The first part of this model needs more nuance, however. If we define the issue as one merely of abstract versus narrative discourse, we risk underestimating the extent of the Presocratic critique and defining their linguistic preoccupations too narrowly.<sup>36</sup> Some Presocratics may deem current resources inadequate and aim at correction and transformation, but they may also entertain more fundamental epistemological doubts about the adequacy of language to express the truth.

The question of linguistic adequacy is connected to the question of the authority perceived to lie behind one's discourse. It is suggestive that a focus on pre-philosophical language coincides with criticism of the mythological figures created by poets like Homer and Hesiod. This suggests that the concern of the early philosophers was not only to be as abstract as possible as quickly as possible. The problems of language, myth, and the authoritative voice of poetry are closely intertwined. The advent of literacy had repercussions in all of these areas; all were the object of intense philosophical interest. Objectification and textualisation of discourse cast a long and complex shadow, of which the technical depersonalisation of narrative and the 'stretching' of vocabulary to meet new needs was only a part.

The hypothesis that nascent literacy contributed to an impulse to objectify poetry, helps us understand how mythological and poetic elements might have been viewed by some Presocratics as emblems of non-philosophical discourse that could be put to a philosophical use. The philosophical critique of earlier poets displays several of the features associated with literacy: the development of a continuous critical tradition, the perception of discourse as something separate from the writer, and the realisation that language does not correspond to reality. The philosophy of Xenophanes and Herakleitos defines itself in part by such a critique. Writing not only enables the Presocratics to view their own discourse with greater objectivity; it presents them with texts of the poets

<sup>35</sup> Havelock 1983: 15–21. Havelock stresses how striking a proportion of the fragments of Herakleitos focus on human communication and the consciousness expressed in speech.

<sup>36</sup> Compare Adkins 1983: 221.

that had previously been transmitted by internalisation. These texts can now undergo a different kind of scrutiny, characterised by greater distance.<sup>37</sup> Misgivings about epic theology and cosmology can be formalised, measured against a fixed object, and transmitted to a new generation of intellectuals. Epic itself can be tested for consistency. The philosophical critique of the world of myth will call forth a defence of the poets, allegory, that in turn adopts the distanced philosophical perspective and interprets Homer as a static and symbolic text.<sup>38</sup> Faced with a plurality of poetic texts that demand correction, the Presocratic philosopher can use his skills in interpretation, his construction of binary and exclusive categories of true and false, to generate a supplementary category of poetic mythological discourse opposed to his own and against which he is measured. He sees the work of previous poets as something identifiably different from his own and, crucially, sees that a large part of this difference lies in mythological narrative. It is not only a matter of objectification of the text leading to perceptions of system in language and hence in nature, nor of a dissatisfaction with the poverty of technical language. Objectification of a text does not lead straight to system; rather, objectification leads to critique, examination of and dissatisfaction with others' texts, to an analysis of this dissatisfaction and a desire to do better, to a redeployment of language and a concurrent redeployment of myth. Myth plays a crucial role, for it is by exploring the insufficiencies of myth that the early philosophers create standards for their own discourse.

Poetic narrative and its mythological content was both alien and problematic; it had to be both rejected and mastered. Thus we find that Presocratic strategy in dealing with the world of myth is complex; while some are silent about the sins of the poets, and others content themselves with castigation, others, the ones with whom this study is chiefly concerned, adopt a strategy of assimilation and inclusion by employing mythological figures and even poetic and narrative mythological elements. Such inclusion is neither naive nor the result of a poverty of philosophical imagination. Rather, it stems from a new awareness that myth, as a textual construct, can be manipulated to new ends inside the genre of philosophy, and that this manipulation can emphasise both the insufficiencies of the old intellectual world and the domination of the new one – and it can also dramatise weaknesses that both these worlds share.

<sup>37</sup> So Detienne [1981]/1986: 68.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Detienne [1981]/1986: 67.

The problem of correspondence begins with the unsatisfactory language of the poets, but does not end there. It demands a further question: is the contingency of language endemic or can it be circumscribed? Will there always be a problem of correspondence between words and reality? This problem was a live one for the Presocratics considered in this book, and is one of the most persistent and troubling problems with which Greek philosophy concerns itself. We will see how the scepticism of Xenophanes fits into a model of endemic contingency where any correspondence between language and reality is at best a species of likeness. The case of Parmenides will also show that language, even philosophical language, must be seen as making the best of a bad job. Even the complexities of Herakleitos can be illumined by such a model. Herakleitos disapproves of human language and its expression of human consciousness and creates a new mode of signification to express his more complex version of reality, but this mode is not a correspondence language.

#### FROM MYTHOS TO LOGOS?

We have been considering the actual influence that the advent of literacy may have had on the rise of philosophy, concentrating on the possibility that textualisation contributed to dissatisfaction with the mode in which available linguistic resources were deployed by the poets and with the vision of the world they expressed. Early philosophers intend to substitute their own vision. Yet this change of intellectual system has, over the centuries, become freighted with heavy baggage. It has been represented as a change from rationality to irrationality, from a primitive to modern mentality. The contrast is often expressed as one between *mythos* and *logos*, and *mythos* thus becomes paradigmatic of a pre-philosophical world of irrational storytellers. This interpretation of the rise of philosophy can be traced back to the philosophers themselves. As we shall see in the next chapter, their polemic against the poets is virulent. It is also misleading. Centuries of scholarship have jumped on the bandwagon with characterisations of the irrationality of myth. Only recently have we recognised this polemic for what it is, part of a process of philosophical self-definition and self-presentation which need not be taken at face value.

In this section, I examine some of the strategies by which people have searched for an irrational age of myth. We should not speak of the *evidence* for such an age, but of the perceived necessity of such a formula-

tion. The age of myth exists as a neat balancing element for the age of reason. Myth may sometimes be irrational; it is often symbolic, but irrationality is not a normative feature. Nor is there anything innately irrational about symbolism. The change from *mythos* to *logos* is thought to start with the first philosophers because some of them criticise the mythological tradition. A series of paratactic developments is interpreted as a single sequence of cause and effect. The rise of philosophy is the rise of scientific thought. The first philosophers criticise the world of myth. Thus science is opposed to myth, which is unscientific. Thus myth is irrational. There is, however, only a contingent relationship between the two premises in the sequence. Once we have rid ourselves of the notion that myth is innately non-philosophic, we will have prepared ourselves to appreciate myth's philosophical possibilities.

The standard view of the 'change' from *mythos* to *logos* ran like this. *Mythos* and *logos* are two opposing poles of the human mind. *Mythos* is symbolic and pictorial, characterised by a lack of scrutiny, totally non-rational, while *logos*, of course, embodies the opposite qualities.<sup>39</sup> The decisive step takes place in Ionia with the first natural philosophers. The search for an underlying principle in the world no longer has a mythical answer. Thus Thales develops the belief that the earth rests on and originated in water (and may have thought that water was the material principle of the world). Thales may think that all things are full of gods (DK 11A22), but these should be seen as forces of nature rather than anthropomorphic divinities.<sup>40</sup> So also the Milesians refer to the qualities of 'dry' and 'hot' (or to 'earth' and 'fire') rather than to divinities like Gaia and Hephaistos. These qualities are objectified by placing the direct article in front of an adjective: *the* hot, *the* dry. Although the earliest Greek philosophy betrays its mythical origins, it still marks the beginning of positivist thought in ancient Greece.<sup>41</sup> Gradually, science and rationality supplant the irrational and supernatural. In its more sophisticated form, this scenario is careful to acknowledge the extent to which early philosophy is ideologically embedded in the social and political institutions of the day.<sup>42</sup> The separation of nature and society in

<sup>39</sup> Nestle 1942: 1–2.

<sup>40</sup> Nestle 1942: 81–2. For a brief survey of the problems associated with attributing to Thales the conception of water as material principle, see Kirk et al. 1983: 92–5.

<sup>41</sup> Vernant [1965]/1983: 343–50.

<sup>42</sup> See Lloyd 1990: 43, 58–66 for a survey of the importance of social and political factors in the rise of science, as well as for possible models for a discourse of scientific legitimisation in the context of the debates that surrounded the rise of democracy. Lloyd does not himself subscribe to the notion of mythical and logical mentalities as explanatory categories.



the new institutions of the polis is seen as a prerequisite for rational thought.<sup>43</sup> Discussion is generalised; knowledge is publicised, a reflection of the social upheaval associated with the rise of the city-state, as aristocratic control of religion and law give way to city-wide cult and the publication of laws.<sup>44</sup>

Even in one of its earlier scholarly formulations, however, this scenario causes discomfort. Nestle may assert that the road to *logos* begins only when one has recognised the symbolic character of myth and raised the question of reality.<sup>45</sup> He is forced to admit, however, that the two poles could penetrate each other. *Logos*, conceived as intellect, is present in the earliest preserved Greek literature. Homeric gods as civilised and 'rational', and the beginnings of theodicy, are traced in the *Odyssey* (1.32–43). Moreover, scenes of divine burlesque such as the notorious sexual deception of Zeus by Hera (*Il.* 14.153–360) evince a loss of reverence for anthropomorphic deities and show that a more rational view of religion is on the rise. To an even greater degree, Hesiod's *Theogony* strives towards systematisation and rational regulation of life.<sup>46</sup> One may envisage a broad movement from irrationality to rationality, but the precise moment and nature of the boundary between the two mental states is hard to specify. No myth is totally irrational; no philosophy (at least before Aristotle) is totally devoid of mythical elements. Nestle accounts for the presence of elements of *logos* in Homer by stressing that he comes at the end – and highpoint – of a developed epic tradition.<sup>47</sup> Essentially, he retrojects the 'age of myth' into a past for which we have no evidence – a suspicious move.

This move is repeated even when condemning an oversimplified opposition between *mythos* and *logos*, and the concept of a primitive rationality devoid of logic. Thus Kirk disputes that Greek myth as we know it is irrational, (since the oral epic of Homer and Hesiod is already rational), but this lack of imaginative unreason is seen as an exception. Either Greek myth is a 'censored, derivative, and literary affair', or the Greeks for some reason simply never had a mythological mentality.<sup>48</sup> Opting for the first alternative, he concludes that the Greeks did at one time have 'real myths' but in an extremely remote past, possibly the Neolithic Age.<sup>49</sup> What we have of Greek myth is not spontaneous or

<sup>43</sup> Vernant [1965]/1983: 356–8.

<sup>44</sup> For a different treatment of the possible egalitarian effects of the publication of laws, see Thomas 1996.

<sup>45</sup> Nestle 1942: 2.

<sup>46</sup> Nestle 1942: 24–48.

<sup>47</sup> Nestle 1942: 21.

<sup>48</sup> Kirk 1970: 241.

<sup>49</sup> Kirk 1970: 240, 244.

fantastic, and is experienced by us only through the lens of a particular literary author. The assumption that written transmission of a myth somehow distorts its meaning has, however, justly been criticised.<sup>50</sup> A myth is always told for a purpose, and its form will always be influenced by a particular genre of discourse, whether literate or oral.<sup>51</sup> We cannot, then, label Greek myth as derivative. Kirk himself agrees that the model that denies coherence and system to myth and orality is flawed; paradoxically, he shows us the staying-power of the opposition of myth and reason. Faced with myths that display rationality even in their earliest incarnations, he still maintains there must have been a period of less rational myth and retrojects it into an irrecoverable past. It has been realised for some time that the picture of the irrational fading away in the face of science is flawed. Popular, traditional, and supernatural beliefs were never superseded.<sup>52</sup> Lloyd points to Herodotos, who found no problem in combining rationalising explanations of natural phenomena with a belief in active divine vengeance for sin. Again, the Presocratic philosopher Empedokles, who was responsible for the first statement of a theory of elements, also conceived of himself as sage and wonder worker, and promised his audience methods of controlling the winds and bringing the dead back to life.<sup>53</sup>

It seems clear that philosophy made a difference in the way we engage in intellection. But why is the difference specified in terms of myth, and why is myth equated with irrationality? Why is the Greek miracle the freedom of *logos* from myth?<sup>54</sup> Because that is what the Greek philosophers tell us to think.<sup>55</sup> Detienne's study of the creation of the concept of 'mythology' has revealed an analogy between the 'scientists' of myth from the nineteenth century onwards, and the first Greek philosophers. For both these groups, the concept of mythology is the result of a sense of scandal, a reaction to cultural elements that seemed morally or intellectually inappropriate (such as divine rapes or infidelities).<sup>56</sup> Such inappropriate material is not at first identified by the Greek word *mythos*; the initial lack of a Greek word for it and its exclusionary philosophical pedigree cast a shadow over the concept of myth.<sup>57</sup> We

<sup>50</sup> Brillante 1990: 113; Detienne [1981]/1986: 124. <sup>51</sup> Brillante 1990: 114.

<sup>52</sup> Lloyd 1979: 5, 227. <sup>53</sup> Lloyd 1979: 29–34. <sup>54</sup> Cf. Vernant [1965]/1983: 343.

<sup>55</sup> Detienne [1981]/1986; Lloyd 1990. <sup>56</sup> Detienne [1981]/1986: 16–21, 43.

<sup>57</sup> Detienne [1981]/1986: xi–xii, 46–53, 63. Edmunds 1990: 2 takes exception to Detienne's contention that myth does not exist as a readily definable concept. He criticises Detienne's semantic arguments and suggests that there is a category of narrative corresponding to 'myth', if myth is defined as a traditional tale. The looseness of this formulation is problematic, but Edmunds is surely correct to emphasise that we must look at practice as well as semantics.

cannot be sure that we are studying something real, rather than a rhetorical construction.

Fortunately, for the purposes of this study, it is the rhetorical construction of myth that is important, rather than questions of whether myth is a 'narrative genre of universal diffusion'.<sup>58</sup> This is because the first and major culprits in the 'creation of mythology' are the Greek philosophers, starting with Xenophanes and ending with Plato. If these philosophers exclude an area of prior cultural tradition from serious consideration, and if that area is what we label 'myth', then clearly a concept of myth exists for them, irrespective of the real-world status of that concept. The tendency of myth to avoid universalising definitions, while problematic for anthropologists and historians of religion, is less troubling when the topic is studied as part of a process of philosophical self-definition. Lloyd's formulation of this phenomenon is useful, especially in its emphasis on the importance of self-conscious methodology. From the fifth century on, he suggests, *mythos* is what you call the work of your rival or predecessor, while *logos* is what you yourself do:

the *logos-mythos* contrast offered an *explicit* category distinction that could be, and frequently was, invoked in order to downgrade whole classes of discourse. It . . . provided a way of casting aspersions on those who engaged in such discourse or at least did so exclusively, inappropriately or unselfconsciously, without, that is, recognizing what they were doing. Poets in general, for instance, at least in the view of some.<sup>59</sup>

Myth, then, is defined neither by motifs nor by literary form. We must study it by fixing our attention on the genres in which mythological tales occur, on particular literary and iconographic forms. Only thus can we gain a real picture of what is going on.<sup>60</sup> It may be that myth is a less evanescent creature than has been thought; the concept certainly has its defenders, and is indispensable in discussion. But even if our usage is a rhetorical illusion, spawned by centuries of anthropological and philosophical dogmatism, our susceptibility to that illusion indicates the extent to which it is foundational for the western rationalist tradition. We do well to investigate the complex processes whereby myth is excluded from the world of philosophy and then, strangely, reintegrated. The present study attempts to characterise myth in the genre of philosophy – an examination that will be especially fruitful because it was the philosophers who took the first steps towards isolating the phenomenon. In light of their hostility towards myth, we need to

<sup>58</sup> The phrase is Calame's (1988: 10).

<sup>59</sup> Lloyd 1990: 44–6.

<sup>60</sup> Calame 1988: 12.

observe what use they make of it when they allow it within their precincts. If myth is the *other* of philosophy, why make any concessions to it at all?

While some early philosophers were eager to condemn and displace their poetic predecessors, they were by no means averse to employing myth themselves. What distinguishes them is that their use of myth is self-conscious and designed to raise second-order questions about the use of language (both their own use and that of the poets). The importance they attach to such second-order questions enables them to stigmatise poetic discourse and myth as a kind of linguistic disease. It is not just that mythological narrative modes persist in philosophical genres or coexist with them (as, in the person of Empedokles, philosopher and shaman coexist), but that these modes are deliberately imported and problematised. In the following chapters, we shall see that philosophical concern with the problems of language is expressed on two levels. There is a generalised concern about the representational capabilities of speech on the part of thinkers such as Herakleitos, Parmenides, and Plato. There is also an awareness and juxtaposition of different types of discourse, ranging from formal demonstration in 'scientific' terms to less analytic and more narrative formulations. The 'opposition' between *mythos* and *logos* is used by Protagoras and other sophists to play with contemporary ethical and political conventions. Their self-conscious and sometimes transgressive employment of mythological paradigms reflects their desire to acquire, teach, and manipulate rhetorical expertise. The same opposition reappears in Plato as a way to negotiate and problematise the status of philosophical discourse.

If myth and *mythos* do not fully converge until the time of Plato, and if the word *mythologia* does not even exist until then, is it legitimate to speak of myth and mythology in the preceding time? These questions of explicit and implicit categories are part of a larger problem that must be negotiated carefully. We must certainly guard against the imposition of modern categories onto ancient evidence, and especially against giving them any explanatory force in an ancient context before they are explicitly formulated. Nevertheless, words such as 'mythology', 'rhetoric', and 'philosophy' do have descriptive value and can legitimately be used in discussion of the period of roughly a century and a half (from the late sixth to the early fourth century BC) during which these categories developed.<sup>61</sup> The emergence of explicit categories for myth and rhetoric

<sup>61</sup> Some would include the category of 'fiction' (Pratt 1993; but see Gill 1993).

in Plato has retrospective force. Plato, and the tradition in which he stood, was not coy about asserting that practices such as mythology and rhetoric had always existed. Given the polemical context, we would expect little else, and it is this tradition that is our focus.

I shall end this section with some comments on two final aspects of poetic discourse that assume programmatic importance for philosophy. I noted in the previous section that an important characteristic of non-philosophical and pre-philosophical myth was its multiplicity and variety. Narratives existed in many (non-canonical) versions. The rise of a critical tradition marks the beginning of a hostility to such multiplicity. The historian Hekataios' scorn of the 'many and ridiculous' tales of the Greeks (*FGrH* 1 F1) is matched by philosophical hostility.<sup>62</sup> The notion of multiplicity has a deep and uncomfortable resonance for philosophers.<sup>63</sup> Multiple versions of a myth, coupled with poetic unconcern for any principle of verification, are an implicit challenge to a philosophical discourse that aims to discover and communicate a univocal truth. We shall see that the Presocratics and Plato are conscious of, indeed, thematise the dangers of multiple poetic voices. They consider that the almost obscene profusion of poetic narrative obscures central metaphysical issues. The problem of multiplicity leads in turn to that of authority. A Muse-based authority is unquestionable and resistant to critique; a poet may assert that his version of the world is superior, but he cannot argue it. Philosophy, however, is committed to argument that is (in principle) verifiable. Poetry generates a proliferation of narrative, whereas philosophy (in theory if not in practice) aims to argue away rival visions of the world until only one verifiable account is left. When philosophical myth is elaborated, it will be distinguished by its univocality. Designed to fit a particular philosophical context, it conveys one meaning and is not easily susceptible to extraction and reformulation in another version.

The second aspect that will be important for the discussions to come is the importance of myth as a form of convention. Myth's authority, its time-honoured role of conveying undemonstrable and sacred truth, was a default setting for a large section of the population in Classical Greece. It expressed certain conventional social and moral truths. To stress the affinity between myth and convention is not just to emphasise the truism that myths were traditional and thus conventional tales. Conventions, as

<sup>62</sup> Brillante 1990: 95. One should not, however, overstate the unanimity of historians on this point. Multiple versions are alive and well in the work of Herodotos.

<sup>63</sup> Havelock speaks of their desire to escape the shifting panorama of events in *mythos* (1983: 21).

societal agreements, are the often-unexamined basis of our daily life. Philosophers, however, want to subject these conventions to scrutiny. When they attack the thoughtless conventionality of myth, they call all conventions into question. This is why manipulating mythological conventions, as do the sophists, is part of the confrontation between nature and culture/convention that played so large a part in the intellectual world of the late fifth century. It also leads to Plato's desire in the *Republic* to reconvene the mythological basis of society.

#### SOME THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Philosophical myth can be defined as the methodologically self-conscious use of mythological material to problematise issues of language and communication. By mythological material, I mean story patterns (such as quest, *anabasis*, *katabasis*), motifs, or narrative characters, which transgress the format of standard philosophical argument and explanation. These motifs may be traditional, such as Prometheus' theft of fire and the Trojan War, or non-traditional (although with traditional roots), such as the journey of Parmenides' narrator to the Gates of the Paths of Night and Day. They are often connected to the supernatural. They are distinguished by being tied to argument, to which, however, they remain subordinate, and with which they are in a state of tension. Argument seeks to be abstract and objective. Myth returns us to the particular and the subjective. It carries with it resonances of the poetic practices from which philosophers seek to separate themselves, and is therefore always a disquieting element. Philosophical myth is textual for two reasons. It is a product of and reaction to the textualisation of poetic discourse that occurred with the advent of literacy, and it is an essentially literary sub-genre inside philosophical discourse. Because it is disquieting and because it is literary, its role has frequently been ignored or argued away as so much window dressing by analytic interpreters of philosophy. Such an approach underestimates myth's philosophical potential.

Philosophical myth's existence as a literary subgenre definable by authorial manipulation (on the lines laid out above) means that other theoretical approaches to myth are of limited use in understanding it. Take, for example, the structuralist conception of myth. Structuralism, as a science of signs, sees myth as a system of communication, like a language. Individual versions of myth are like individual sentences, but the structuralist critic will look for the system of rules underlying the

language. The system underlying an individual myth is its 'deep structure'; analysis strives to decode this structure by laying bare a series of logical relationships, whether of opposition, inversion, or parallelism.<sup>64</sup> These relationships (which themselves undergo transformations) are not a function of an author's intention, but expressions of social categories.<sup>65</sup> While a structuralist approach can help to analyse a society's thought structure, it will shed less light on philosophical myth, since whatever structures underlie traditional uses of myth will be radically transformed by philosophical manipulation. This is not to say one could not perform structural analysis on philosophical myth, only that doing so misses what makes it distinctive.

More to the point is that the dynamics of the relationship of myth and philosophy involve not only the most ancient, but the most modern speculation on the nature of language. This relationship brings us close to areas that have been of concern to contemporary theorists, the problems of textual authority and of embedded counterpoint or critique within a text. Let us turn briefly to Hesiod and to his Muses' statement that they know how to speak many false things like genuine things, but also, when they wish, true things (*Theog.* 27–8). Ferrari has mounted a critique of the attempt to read this passage as implying that language always signifies things by distortion and that representation itself is a lie. Such a move is avowedly deconstructionist in inspiration, based on the Derridean insight that the 'original' which language signifies is always absent. On this reading, both the true speech of the Muses and the false will be an imitation.<sup>66</sup> Ferrari counters this interpretation by insisting on the precision of Hesiod's formulation in the *Theogony*: 'only of falsehoods, and precisely *not* of language in general, do the Muses say that they are "like the genuine"'. Worries about the possibility of false speech are centred on the users of speech rather than on the relation of words and the world.<sup>67</sup> I would like to take Ferrari's position as the starting point for further consideration of the relationship between myth and language in the philosophers I will be examining. Hesiod does not recognise any difficulty in the relationship between words and the world when the words are true ones; it is only falsehood that raises the problem. Can the same thing be said for the philosophers?

<sup>64</sup> Especially important in this context is the notion of a 'binary opposition', such as that between nature and culture, or raw and cooked.

<sup>65</sup> For brief summaries of the contributions, and limitations, of structuralism (in its many varieties) to the study of Greek mythology, see Burkert 1979: 5–18 and Graf 1985: 47–54.

<sup>66</sup> Ferrari 1988: 46. <sup>67</sup> Ferrari 1988: 47, 59.

On my interpretation, it cannot.<sup>68</sup> Early Greek philosophers such as Xenophanes and Herakleitos shared a belief that language had been misused by prior thinkers. The chief culprits were identified as certain poets and the mythological tradition in which they worked. Some philosophers aim to correct the misuse by the creation of a new philosophical discourse and a binary system wherein myth is opposed to philosophy. At the same time, however, they have compelling reasons not to exclude myth entirely. The first is their desire to appropriate the authority and efficacy of poetic language and myth. The second is connected with their reservations about the expressive and representational qualities of language in general. Philosophy engages in a series of moves that demarcate myth, reject it, and then attempt to internalise a reworked version of it. Why should philosophy incorporate ‘false things like genuine ones’? If the rise of philosophy entailed the marginalisation of an entire poetic tradition and this led to more general worries about the correspondence of language and reality, it is possible that the philosophers may have found a way of encoding this worry in their discourse as Hesiod did not. The ‘gap’ between words and the world which Ferrari correctly finds missing in the Hesiodic account of truth would be a function of the rise of philosophy.

It is instructive to compare the philosophical approach to myth and language sketched in the previous pages with the approaches of some deconstructionist critics, and this for two reasons. First, because these ancient philosophers sketch a sceptical approach towards language that still has resonance for us today, and second, because they did not choose to develop their scepticism along deconstructive lines. Is this observation mere anachronism? Let me be quite clear that I do not maintain that any early Greek philosopher was a crypto-deconstructionist, nor that Plato or the Presocratics perceived the gap between language and reality to be identical with the one identified by deconstruction.<sup>69</sup> The scepticism of Xenophanes and the obscurity of Herakleitos, both of which will be analysed in the next chapter, reflect their dissatisfaction with previous systems of signification. Contrary to Havelock’s claim that the linguistic task of the Presocratics was to invent a new discourse of correspondence where philosophical speech would match the truth of

<sup>68</sup> Ferrari 1988: 62 believes that even Plato is best understood as assigning the immediacy of Hesiodic truth to the Forms, and the quality of spuriousness to the sensible world. But it is another question whether direct awareness of the Forms can be translated into accurate linguistic representation of them (see Chapters 6–8).

<sup>69</sup> Gorgias is a possible exception.



things, these philosophers doubt whether correspondence is possible. Plato shares these worries, and also has reservations on the subject of the accessibility of accurate knowledge. He regards it as accessible in principle, but extremely difficult and never yet achieved in practice. Platonic concerns about language and the grounds of linguistic and textual authority, expressed through the vehicle of myth, will be the focus of the final chapters of this book.

Deconstruction holds that language is not stable or well defined and that it is impossible firmly to attach meaning to any given signifier. There is no natural relationship between language and reality, and transcendental meaning is a fiction that cannot be taken for granted.<sup>70</sup>

It questions [the] basic logic of binary opposition, but not in a simple, binary, antagonistic way . . . Instead of a simple 'either/or' structure, deconstruction attempts to elaborate a discourse that says *neither* 'either/or', *nor* 'both/and' nor even 'neither/nor', while at the same time not totally abandoning these logics either.<sup>71</sup>

As the work of Derrida and other deconstructionist critics has shown, the attack on binary opposition is an attack against the very foundation of western metaphysics, the law of noncontradiction.<sup>72</sup> This is a law which early Greek philosophers were at pains to establish; they cannot therefore have deconstructionist reservations about it. Moreover, if deconstruction makes transcendent meaning a fiction, this is clearly different from a position which holds that transcendent meaning exists but is not easily expressible or is impossible to express. Collapsing an opposition between words and the world is not the same thing as anxiety about the opposition itself.

The nature of the distortion involved in linguistic representation is different in the two cases. Nevertheless, the idea of collapsing a binary opposition can help to illuminate the practice of the philosophers to be considered in this book, since they do play with one crucial binary opposition: myth against philosophy. The philosophy considered here came into existence proclaiming its difference from poetic mythological discourse. It aimed for greater abstraction and objectivity, less narrative, less contradiction and questionable ethics. Scholarship on the 'progress' from *mythos* to *logos* acquiesced in this opposition, even though it was overdrawn, because scholars were caught up in philosophy's rhetorical self-positioning. Modern scholars have succeeded fairly well in decon-

<sup>70</sup> This summary is taken from Eagleton 1983: 127–32. See also Culler 1982: 110–34, 180–225.

<sup>71</sup> Johnson 1987: 12. <sup>72</sup> See, for example, de Man 1979: 120–4.

structuring the opposition, although they perhaps go too far when they deny any reality to the concept of myth at all, as though it had no reality outside the opposition. That philosophy constructs myth as its 'other' does not entail that it had no material with which to work.

Yet after excluding the world of myth, certain philosophers bring it back into the fold. Philosophical myth as a subgenre carries with it traces of its past and undermines any hard and fast opposition between *mythos* and *logos*. A deconstructive response to the philosophical rejection of myth might be to look for elements of what is excluded inside philosophy, since we are told that what one tries to exclude is always and inexorably included. The discovery of mythical elements in philosophical discourse would show that philosophy cannot function without its opposite, that it needs the mythical (and for 'mythical' we should here read 'irrational').<sup>73</sup> This is easily enough done, but there is a problem. As far as most of the philosophers in this book are concerned (Herakleitos, Parmenides, Plato – perhaps even Gorgias), there is nothing inexorable about the inclusion of mythological material; it is a matter of choice. When the philosophers use myth they do it on their own terms, creating a special subgenre. It was suggested above that one reason they do this is to appropriate ostentatiously the authority of poetry and myth by demonstrating the subordination of myth. A deconstructive reading might see this move as an attempt to fashion a universal and totalising philosophical discourse. It would be partly correct to do so. Yet the specifically philosophical nature of the included myth would demonstrate that the attempt to totalise fails since the philosophers do not include what they think they include, the mythic and irrational. Nevertheless, even though the philosophical inclusion of myth would rightly be interpreted as an attempt to totalise, it would be underestimating the philosophers concerned to think that they did so simplistically. Philosophical myth, as already remarked, exists as a negative imprint of the myth that is excluded. Their myth is not the multiple and uncontrolled discourse of the poets; is it then a fantasy that one can control the uncontrollable? The answer must be that philosophical myth looks in two directions. Its presence in philosophical texts acknowledges what philosophy sees as its irrational past and performs two functions. The enclosure of mythological elements inside philosophical discourse enacts the formal subordination of the world of myth to the world of philosophy. At the same time, it implicitly acknowledges that non-

<sup>73</sup> This is the approach taken by the scholars cited by Detienne [1981]/1986: 108, 117–18, where mythology and philosophy are perceived as two sides of the same coin.

philosophical myth cannot be totally absorbed and excluded if philosophy is to retain coherence as a comprehensible form of discourse.

Presocratics such as Herakleitos and Xenophanes share a discomfort over the capacities of language. Their rejection of the world of myth and poetic language by way of self-definition is founded on the inadequacy of that world and that language to represent the reality they perceive. The inherent tension between myth and philosophy keeps such anxieties ever before us. Myth in philosophy does not, therefore, represent irrationality as such, but a system of discourse in which language is not an adequate expression of reality. Even when harnessed to the most lofty philosophical goals, myth, because of its particular intellectual history, will always remind us of what cannot be achieved by the discourse in which it is embedded. One might say that it helps to keep the philosophers honest. One should also observe that the philosophical use of myth is largely confined to those philosophers who have linguistic preoccupations. Herakleitos, Parmenides, Gorgias, and Plato are deeply involved in what can and what cannot be communicated. If, then, these philosophers are concerned with the gap between language and reality, and if myth is *par excellence* the discourse in which this gap is native and definitive, philosophical myth can be viewed as a paradigm for this gap. Mythological philosophers are those who realise the shortcomings of language and install these shortcomings in their work.

There are three possible lines of response to the recognition of the gap between speech and the world. One can ignore it. This is the most common interpretation of Greek practice. One can cease all attempts at communication in despair. Or one can include the gap by constructing a sign for it (in this case, myth) and then carry on as best one can. We must then ask how helpful the philosophical practice is. Does it provide an escape from the problems of language? Once again, a comparison with the viewpoints of deconstructionist critics proves helpful. In 'White mythology' Derrida considers a tripartite schema in which non-meaning (lack of language) is opposed to the realm of truth where language actualises and erases itself. Between these two extremes lies language, 'when meaning has appeared, but when truth might still be missed'. This area is also occupied by the concept of metaphor, where signification exists in a state of availability.<sup>74</sup> To this extent, all language is metaphor, and the invention of metaphor as a trope would be a way of distracting ourselves from this fact, displacing the indeterminacy of language onto a

<sup>74</sup> Derrida 1982: 241.

scapegoat.<sup>75</sup> This analysis of metaphor can be extended into one of myth. Myth would then be the middle ground between non-meaning and truth, the scapegoat onto which the philosophers project their anxieties about language. For Derrida, such a procedure would not be an escape from the problem, but an evasion of it. Yet there is a difference between metaphor and myth in this respect, that while language is inescapably figural and metaphorical, it is not innately mythological. Here is one advantage of myth being a constructed, rather than a natural, paradigmatic system. It always bears witness to the intentionality through which it becomes a scapegoat and thus can retain its force as a symbol rather than being thought an evasion. Although myth does encapsulate the displacement of philosophical anxiety over language, it does not do so in a moment of self-blindness.

De Man deals repeatedly with the possibility that texts may be able to escape the contradictions of a deconstructive reading. Is it possible to include the contradictions of reading in a narrative that would contain them? Let us consider for a moment de Man's argumentation in his analysis of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. After pointing out that in the *Birth of Tragedy* there is a tension between claims to universal veracity and a mode of presentation that questions these claims, de Man asks whether we are merely studying a contradictory text that hides its contradictions in bad rhetoric. The answer is no, since the deconstruction finds its arguments within the text. The text cannot, therefore, be considered to be blind. In addition, the deconstruction takes place, not between statements in the text, but between metalinguistic statements about the rhetorical nature of language and a practice that undermines these statements. This undermining leaves a residue of meaning that is also a statement:

The nonauthoritative secondary statement that results from the reading will have to be a statement about the limitations of textual authority. This statement cannot be read as such out of the original text, although it is sufficiently prepared there to come to the surface in the form of residual areas of meaning that cannot be fitted within the genetic totality.<sup>76</sup>

In this analysis, a discontinuity between rhetorical theory and practice results in a deconstruction that creates a statement about the limits of textual authority. It is tempting to draw an analogy with the philosophi-

<sup>75</sup> Cf. the remarks of Johnson 1987: 37–8, on de Man's analysis of metaphor and de Man 1979: 111, 151–3, 198.

<sup>76</sup> De Man 1979: 99.

cal use of myth. We are faced with a rejection of the practice of myth by philosophy as a genre. Yet certain philosophers employ mythological elements and narrative. This discontinuity may be subject to deconstruction, but it is not a mere contradiction because it does not result from a mere juxtaposition of contradictory statements. Moreover, the collision of theory and practice produces an implicit statement about the limitations of textual authority. In this case, the authority so limited is that of philosophical discourse.

Is this an answer to the problem of infinite theoretical regress? Not for the deconstructionist. De Man would point out that even philosophy's delimitation of its own authority over language does not escape from rhetoric, but only involves it in a more complicated rhetoric. One more reversal does no good, and a literature is not less deceitful because it confesses its own deceit (or in the case of philosophy, its own potential for lack of authority). Deconstruction can never come to an end because it states the fallacy of reference in a referential manner: 'There is no escape from this, for the text also establishes that deconstruction is not something we can decide to do or not to do at will. It is co-extensive with any use of language.'<sup>77</sup> Yet even though philosophy can never justify itself in the eyes of deconstruction, its use of myth does come close to acknowledging the problem and sketching a solution. Myth is particularly well suited to such a role because of the tension that characterises its relationship with philosophy, since some philosophers construct it as an outside that is then transformed and brought inside. Deconstruction may well state the fallacy of reference in a referential mode and trap itself in its own deconstructive moment, but philosophical myth has the advantage of being non-referential from the start, of being a discourse of falsity and non-correspondence. This is why it can be an effective sign of the gap between language and truth. If myth is something that philosophers can choose to use or not to use, then its evocative presence signposts an awareness of the problems of language without straightforward referentiality and without the suspicion that the author has fallen into myth unawares (as is the case with metaphor and other figurative language). While this solution is itself liable to deconstruction, it is subtle and methodologically self-aware.

The discussion of this chapter has been governed by various paired oppositions: *logos* and *mythos*, rationality and irrationality, philosophy and poetry, literacy and orality. All are conceptual schemes retrojected

<sup>77</sup> De Man 1979: 110–25.

onto ancient material by ancient philosophers or modern scholars with an axe to grind. Each scheme may be helpful in sorting out what was going on in the Archaic and Classical periods, but each carries with it the danger of oversimplification. Note the tendency for all items on either side of the opposition to collapse into each other. *Mythos* tends to coalesce with irrationality, orality, and poetry, while *logos* is assimilated to rationality, literacy, and philosophy. Such simplification, as we have seen, underestimates the interpenetration of the two sides. Why bother to labour anachronistic categories? Because an awareness of how these various schemes map onto each other is essential if we are to understand a philosophical use of myth that both encompasses and flies in the face of these oppositions. We must beware of thinking that Herakleitos and Parmenides incorporate mythological elements into their philosophy because they are somehow trapped in an oral and poetic mindset from which they only partly escape, or that myth is employed to allow the irrational back into philosophy. Moreover, the conceptual categories and equations that are so problematic are derived in large part from philosophy's self-presentation and rhetoric of legitimation. Study of how they have perpetuated themselves in early Greek thought helps us see how philosophy organised its own intellectual universe and determined how we organised ours. When early Greek philosophy plays with the *mythos/logos* opposition, then, it does something extraordinary.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Some Presocratics*

#### INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I examined issues that bear on the demarcation of a realm of myth. I outlined how usage of the word *mythos*, at first associated with authoritative speech, was transformed: gradually, it became connected with the traditional tales (myths) that were the vehicles of authoritative social conventions. The first philosophers attempted to appropriate this authority for their own intellectual project, whose product, they hoped, would displace traditional sources of wisdom. The textualisation of these sources in the wake of increasing literacy enabled philosophers to develop a methodological self-consciousness in the rejection of poetic multiplicity. They explored a new source for discursive authority, one which contrasted with Muse-based inspiration in its appeal to argument. An important aspect of textualising, demarcating, and excluding the poets was the concern that poetic predecessors had misused language. I suggested that this concern may have led to worries about the contingency of language. We may now proceed to a more detailed investigation of the nature of the gesture by which certain Presocratics reject the world of poetic mythologising. This chapter will focus on the challenge offered by Xenophanes, Herakleitos, Empedokles, and Parmenides to poetic thought and language, and, more briefly, on the response to this challenge.<sup>1</sup> Parmenides' poem on Being will receive the lengthiest treatment, since it both critiques ordinary thought and language, and sets this critique in a mythological framework. It is therefore well suited to dramatise the tensions and possibilities of mythology and philosophy.

Whether implicitly or explicitly, Xenophanes, Herakleitos, and Parmenides reject prior poetic mythological discourse. Their self-definition

<sup>1</sup> The theories of the majority of Ionian natural philosophers, although significant for any general evaluation of the rise of Greek philosophy, will not form a part of the current discussion.

is closely connected with the repudiation of previous modes of conceiving and representing the divine and the transcendental. We will examine the ways all of them play upon conventional topoi of poetic inspiration, and will investigate the polemic directed at the poets by Xenophanes and Herakleitos. The Presocratics studied in this chapter communicate a new vision of reality by conjuring with traditional expectations about the relationship between poet and Muse, and by manipulating traditional mythological/religious figures. They find themselves in a paradoxical situation. They perceive a misfit between discourse and reality, yet they must employ this unsound tool. Xenophanes, therefore, makes a programmatic statement on the ubiquity of conjecture, and connects his sceptical programme with a critique of anthropomorphism and mythological immorality. Herakleitos resorts to ambivalent signification to dramatise problems of poetic style and content. Parmenides creates a paradoxical philosophy encased in and at war with poetry and myth. Only Empedokles is ready to compromise with conventional ways of speaking. We will see an indication of the effectiveness of the Presocratic critique in the reworking of mythological material in allegory and rationalisation. These two methodologies concede to the early philosophers the ground they have been claiming and aim to reinterpret myth on their terms. Allegory transforms myths into fixed texts; both methodologies apply criteria of truth to them. Yet they also produce a (non-philosophical) proliferation of interpretation, and an *excess* of linguistic correspondence that escapes philosophical rigour. Strangely enough, only preserving the problem of correspondence preserves that rigour.

THE EXCLUSIONARY GESTURE: XENOPHANES,  
HERAKLEITOS, AND EMPEDOKLES

Our story begins with Xenophanes. Two aspects of his philosophy are important here: his moral reservations towards the mythological tradition exemplified by Homer and Hesiod, and his scepticism. The combination of these two concerns results in a reformulation of the sources of poetic authority. Xenophanes was active in the second half of the sixth century BC and was himself a rhapsode, a professional performer of poetry. In most cases this entailed performing the poetry of Homer and Hesiod; Xenophanes, however, performed his own compositions. According to Diogenes Laertius (9.18ff. = DK 21A1), these included epic, elegiac, and iambic verses. His preference for his own poetry, if



this is what the testimonium implies, is evidently a result of his disapproval of Homeric and Hesiodic gods. He attacks the epic portrayal of the divine: Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all the things that are a matter of reproach and blame among men: stealing, committing adultery and deceiving each other (DK 21B11). Since the poet is a teacher in Greek society (all men have learnt from Homer (B10)), this is a serious accusation to make, for people will take such unjust deeds as their model. Xenophanes is prepared to take on the role of teacher himself, and is compelled to do so on ethical grounds: Homeric gods are immoral. Xenophanes does not intend his conclusions to be merely of theoretical interest. In his elegy on correct behaviour at a symposium, he recommends that men hymn god with pure words and auspicious *mythoi* (B1.14).<sup>2</sup> The participants are not to sing the battles of Titans, Giants, and Centaurs, the inventions of former men, since there is nothing useful in these (lines 21–3). One should only sing what is useful.

So far, Xenophanes' critique is purely ethical and didactic, but there is more to come. He disagrees with man's anthropomorphic representation of divinity. Each race of man creates its gods in its own image (B16), and if animals could create images of their gods, these would have an animal form (B15). One god, however, is greatest and is unlike men in every respect, both physically and mentally. He does not move but effects everything by the power of his thought (B23, 25, 26). Xenophanes' ethical critique has traditionally been connected with his rejection of anthropomorphism, and this is the line I shall adopt here. Some recent scholarship has argued that there is a difficulty in assuming that the former proceeds inescapably from the latter. If god, or 'the gods', are totally dissimilar to human beings, is it plausible to attribute moral excellence to them?<sup>3</sup> At stake here is the nature of Xenophanes' attack on anthropomorphism. Does Xenophanes assert the radical incompar-

<sup>2</sup> On the nature of the contrast between *mythos* and *logos* here, see Leshner 1992: 48–9.

<sup>3</sup> The interpretation of B23 is problematic. Some have taken it to imply that there is both one 'greatest' god and a variety of lesser ones. The question is complicated by uncertainty over whether the adjective 'one' is attributive or predicate. For a recent argument for plural gods, see Leshner 1992: 96–102. Finkelberg (1990: 146, n. 101 and *passim*) argues for a strong (and Eleatic) monotheism. His presentation of the ancient doxographical tradition makes it clear that Xenophanes was universally considered a monotheist by ancient interpreters. (For an attempt to bring the ancient doxography into line with a polytheistic interpretation, see also Albertelli 1939: 29–31.) It is interesting that the tension created by asserting that god is one, greatest among gods and men, is in part a tension between philosophical declaration and poetic formulaic language ('among gods and men'). On balance, the assumption of plural gods raises more problems than it solves.

ability of god and men, or their dissimilarity? What sense does it make to apply the predicate 'just' to the divine?<sup>4</sup>

There is no evidence that Xenophanes wanted to conceive of a god beyond moral predication, or that he thought divine justice was incommensurate with its human counterpart. Understanding and moral excellence need not be conceived as human or personal qualities; their attribution to the divine need not, therefore, be inconsistent with a rejection of anthropomorphism. A disjunction between Xenophanes' ethical critique and his theology would entail that the gods of poetry exist in a self-sufficient literary world, in which they conform to certain criteria of moral excellence (the 'auspicious *mythoi*' of B1) for the good of society. This role, however, does not imply their actual existence. Such a radical disjunction presumes a separation between Xenophanes as philosopher and as didactic poet. Although Plato creates an ideal state based upon such a separation, where unphilosophical masses are indoctrinated through ethically pure myths and only the elite seek philosophical knowledge, Xenophanes' own career as a rhapsode suggests that matters have not progressed that far. We are ignorant of the precise context in which he developed his theology and of the extent to which his presentation was determined by performance context and generic factors. Nevertheless, the variety of his production indicates that he has not retired from the world of the polis in despair, but still seeks to influence his fellow symposiasts.

The desire to draw a distinction between Xenophanes' 'philosophical' message and his criteria for acceptable presentation of poetic divinities is an eloquent witness of the tension we perceive between poetic/mythological and philosophical presentation. Once again, the opposition between *mythos* and *logos* makes itself felt. Yet although Xenophanes rejects the prior poetic thought world, he shows no signs of abandoning the suggestive possibilities of mythological and poetic presentation. In this respect, his procedure is programmatic for many of the thinkers examined in this book: myth is retained, but its significance is changed by virtue of the critique to which it is subjected. Xenophanes, then, thinks that prior portrayals of the divine are flawed, both in the activities ascribed to the gods, and in their conception of divine shape. His portrayal corrects the error by attempting to discount the human viewpoint. Rejecting anthropocentrism means coming to grips with the fallibility of human knowledge and language and the influence of

<sup>4</sup> Leshner 1992: 93–4.

human convention. Since poets are teachers, poetic conventions, at the level both of diction and of content, must be exposed for the (illogical) conjecture they are. We are about to see that Xenophanes develops his scepticism by playing with the terms of the relationship between the poet and his source of authority.

In B34, he declares

No man has ever seen what is clear, nor will there be anyone who knows about the gods and whatever I say on all subjects. For even if someone should happen to speak entirely what is accomplished, nevertheless, he himself does not know it. Conjecture (*dokos*) is constructed in all cases.<sup>5</sup>

This fragment must be read in conjunction with B35, usually interpreted to mean that even Xenophanes' opinions are only *like* the truth: 'Let these things be thought to be similar to genuine things' (ταῦτα δεδοξάσθω μὲν εἰκότα τοῖς ἐτύμοισι). I read these two fragments as expressions of a generalised scepticism with regard to human knowledge. Even if B34 does, as has been argued, establish sense perception as a criterion for knowledge of what is at hand, the realm of theology is still beyond the reach of certain knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the fragment seems to treat knowledge about the divine as a kind of paradigm case for all human knowledge. Because of his rejection of anthropomorphism Xenophanes denies that the gods descend into human affairs or that mortals can ascend to the level of the gods or engage in successful divination.<sup>7</sup> No one knows the truth about the gods, least of all poets and diviners. The nature of poetic error is significant. They attribute to the gods and the world of the divine an excess of correspondence: they make the gods exactly like men, and trivially so. Whereas for Xenophanes the relationship of correspondence or likeness is an expression of intellectual caution, for poets it is an expression of narrative truth. It is a very different thing to say 'this is like the truth', and 'the gods are like men'.<sup>8</sup> We might say that the

<sup>5</sup> The translation of this fragment is controversial. It has been seen to embody the hard-line position that man has no criterion for distinguishing true belief, or to represent the more moderate position that we can apprehend the truth even if we cannot attain certainty (Leshner 1978: 2; 1992: 155–69). Fränkel [1925]/1974: 127 saw it as an expression of rigorous empiricism, but the unrestricted reference of lines 1 and 4 indicate generalised scepticism (Leshner 1978: 5–6; 1992: 162). For an analysis of the ancient doxographical tradition, see Turrini 1982.

<sup>6</sup> Leshner (1992: 166–8) currently favours a focus on the limitations of human knowledge given the incompleteness of human experience. The implication of this reading of the fragment is that 'statements concerning the non-evident realm of the divine as well as the far-reaching generalisations of natural sciences cannot be known as to *saphes* [the certain truth]'.

<sup>7</sup> This argument is taken from Leshner 1978: 11–15.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. 21B23, where Xenophanes' one god is similar to mortals neither in body nor thought.

poets have lost touch with the metaphoricity of their mythology and that this leads to facile and immoral comparisons. The question of myth is therefore intimately tied to the problems of language, metaphor, truth, and correspondence.

It has long been recognised that Xenophanes' cautious assessment of human wisdom plays into the traditional poetic contrast between divine and human knowledge. One thinks particularly of the singer in *Iliad* 2.484–92: mortals know nothing unless a god helps.<sup>9</sup> In B35, however, he transforms this topos. When he declares that his ideas are 'similar to valid things' (ἔοικότα τοῖς ἐτύμοισι), he recalls the famous comment of the Muses to Hesiod that they know how to say many false things like genuine ones (ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα, *Theog.* 27) and the similar characterisation of Odysseus at *Od.* 19.203. In the two latter cases the words refer to the power of poetic (or Odyssean) speech to approximate false things to true. Xenophanes' reformulation of this convention is telling; whereas Hesiod talks about the verisimilitude of falsehood, Xenophanes thinks his own theories are like 'what is genuine'.<sup>10</sup> He contrasts programmatically his own limited formulations with the claims made by the poets.<sup>11</sup> Although both think mortal wisdom about the most important topics is a matter of conjecture, Xenophanes removes the coda from the poetic topos. The poet declares, 'I would be unable to perform if you, goddess, were not to help me.' The philosopher changes a conditional into a simple statement: mortals are unable to make validated judgements about the world. There is no mechanism of divine revelation to help them, and the topos of divine versus human knowledge is transformed. Xenophanes composes a new poetry divested of its roots in revelation and Muse-based inspiration and repudiates the poetic tendency to tell illogical and harmful tales.<sup>12</sup>

Since *dokos*, seeming or conjecture, is the regular human state of affairs (B34), any human speech, even Xenophanes', is at best something that resembles the truth. Thus Xenophanes denies that there is a privileged realm of poetic truth where communication takes place divorced from its human context. All we have to work with is the product of our own conjecture, more or less logical or ethical; we can see, therefore, the importance of a consistent set of standards for

<sup>9</sup> Deichgräber 1938: 22–4; Snell 1953: chapter 7; Guthrie 1962: 398–9; Turrini 1982: 130–1.

<sup>10</sup> So Leshner 1992: 173, following Guthrie 1962: 396n.

<sup>11</sup> As suspected by Guthrie 1962: 396 n. 2. Cf. Deichgräber 1938: 24.

<sup>12</sup> Ironically, Xenophanes' rejection of poetic inspiration would later be held against him by Philo (*On Providence* 2.39, 42 = DK 21A26).

speculation about the unseen.<sup>13</sup> The rejection of anthropocentrism and divine immorality proceeds from the presumption that such standards are useful. Xenophanes' critique of specific poetic portrayals of the gods arises from a coherent theological/philosophical position that entails the denial of efficacious and authoritative poetic speech. The tales of the poets are not authoritative because they are grounded in conjecture rather than in divine inspiration. They are not efficacious because they do not set a good example. We should note a further significance of the use of *dokos*. The word means 'seeming' or 'conjecture', but we can tease out a further implication. Mortals must make do with conjecture, but they habitually install it as received truth; thus it becomes 'convention'. The importance of myth as convention was sketched in the previous chapter. We can now better appreciate how myth-as-convention and language-as-convention are connected. Received poetic portrayals of the gods are mediated by poetic language. Both have no logical basis, and both have become conventional; these conventions must be challenged and transformed.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that a critique of the poetic uses of myth arises in conjunction with a meditation on the problematic nature of human knowledge and the terms in which it is expressed. The poets had created a world where truth was essentially a rhetorical construct. Xenophanes disapproved of the easy assurance with which they manipulated the true and the false. They misunderstood the nature of god, and the grounds for and possibility of true speech; the magnitude of their mistake was expressed in their use of mythological material. Not only did they *not* have access to a divinely-validated truth, but the dissimilarity between the real nature of god and our conceptions of him meant that there was no route by which we might use our everyday experience to gain insight into divine nature.<sup>14</sup> Two points need emphasising: that for Xenophanes the problem with poetic mythologies is connected with the problem of knowledge and its linguistic expression, and that his own philosophical aspirations are defined by the exclusion of traditional poetic mythological practice. There is a fundamental

<sup>13</sup> Finkelberg (1990: 135–46) thinks that his theology did not fall within the scope of this critique since it was established by logical proof. This interpretation rests partly on refusing theological reference to the phrase 'concerning the gods' in B34. The gods concerned are, he argues, meteorological phenomena, and are denied true divinity. Yet it is in B34, if anywhere, that Xenophanes makes a global statement about the conditions for knowledge, and there is no indication that the field of the comment is restricted or that the gods he mentions are meteorological. He says, 'the things I say concerning the gods', *not*, 'the so-called gods'.

<sup>14</sup> Leshner (1992: 115–16) remarks that Xenophanes asserts rather than argues the nature of his one god. For opposing arguments, see Finkelberg 1990: 136–46.

qualitative difference between Xenophanes and other Archaic poets. We are not dealing merely with competition within the poetic/mythological tradition, where one story is preferred because of its greater excitement or inventiveness, or even its ethics. Xenophanes' ethical and metaphysical objections apply to the entire mythological tradition and arise from the application of different criteria for validity.<sup>15</sup> What Xenophanes puts in place of the gigantomachy (for example) is a theological system that refuses to assimilate itself to the anthropomorphic narrative of myth. He offers not a different version, but a different universe.<sup>16</sup>

The same exclusionary gesture is repeated in the work of his younger contemporary Herakleitos in the late sixth century. The agonistic ethos that was such an important part of the poetic involvement with myth carried over into the world of the philosophical sages as they struggled to distinguish their own field of endeavour. Herakleitos had a low opinion of most of his predecessors and contemporaries. In fragment DK 22B40 he stigmatises Hesiod, Pythagoras, Xenophanes, and Hekataios: much learning did not bring them any sense. The catholicism of Herakleitos' dislike is notable. Poetry, philosophy, and logography are lumped together; the very diversity of the authors indicates that Herakleitos is interested in a global condemnation of all previous thought. Nor is this the only instance of derogatory references to other thinkers. Pythagoras is mentioned in one other fragment (B129) as the creator of an evil art, and in B57 Hesiod, the 'teacher of most men', is criticised for not knowing the nature of day and night. Similarly in B106 he is criticised for not knowing that the nature of every day is the same. Herakleitos stresses again the importance of the poet as (bad) teacher:

What mind or understanding do they have? They believe the poets of the people and use the crowd as their teacher, not knowing that 'the many are base, but the good are few'. (B104).

Some of his most violent outbursts are directed against Homer. He inveighs that Homer and Archilokhos deserve to be expelled from the contests and flogged (B42), and he mocks Homer for being unable to solve the riddle of the lice (B56). Another testimonium does not refer to Homer by name, but clearly has him in mind: in A22 Herakleitos

<sup>15</sup> Wipprecht 1902: 6; Kahn 1979: 11.

<sup>16</sup> Pratt (1993: 136–40) argues that Xenophanes' criticisms of other poets operate only at the level of the ethical, but Xenophanes' denial of poetic access to a realm of divinely validated information brings the question of truth and verisimilitude back into the picture.

censures the poet who wished that conflict would vanish from gods and men (cf. *Iliad* 18.107). For Herakleitos, however, the strife of opposites is essential to cosmic harmony. The subtlest type of allusion is the inversion or refining of a literary topos. Thus, Kahn hypothesises, B17, which asserts that most men do not think about things in the way that they come upon them, is a correction of *Odyssey* 18.136, where the mind of men is said to depend upon the day that Zeus brings upon them.<sup>17</sup> So too, the assertion that war is 'common' (B80) gives a deeper meaning to Homer and Archilokhos' similar formulations.<sup>18</sup> We have seen similar corrections of literary topoi in Xenophanes. Both he and Herakleitos correct through allusion, although the latter does not provide an explicit principle of selection to help us decide why Homer and Hesiod should be discarded. His global denunciations are sometimes almost too general to be useful, while specific disagreements are in matters of detail, not principle.

An examination of some of the fragments that deal with Herakleitos' conception of *logos* and traditional religious/mythological figures will indicate that his rejection of traditional wisdom (which includes even 'philosophers' such as Pythagoras) is intimately connected with his linguistic concerns. Like Xenophanes, he worries at issues of the accessibility and expression of truth, even though they both have vastly different conceptions of what that truth is. Herakleitos is no sceptic, and thinks that truth is attainable, but he too concludes that mortal language is a misrepresentation whose perpetration is due largely to the poets. Unlike Xenophanes, he uses the resources of style to pinpoint the problem of the complexities of the *logos* and its usual misrepresentation. This is unsurprising in a thinker whose principle of universal coherence is called *logos*.<sup>19</sup> The question of whether the *logos* is a public or a private possession (resolved in favour of the former alternative) turns out to have distressing implications for poetic authority.

What is the relationship between mankind, the world, and the *logos* that pervades it? Men do not understand the *logos* both before and after they hear it (B1). They are 'like those without experience' when they hear the philosopher's words, even though they experience the reality that gives rise to these words every day. Here, ironically, the relation of likeness, which should characterise the congruence of man's understanding and the *logos*, is used instead to express the absence of corre-

<sup>17</sup> Kahn 1979: 102–4.      <sup>18</sup> Kahn 1979: 205.

<sup>19</sup> *Logos*, as opposed to *mythos*, always carries an implication of rational computation: Hofmann 1922: 106.

spondence. There is a disjunction between understanding and reality. The importance of a correspondence between understanding and speech is underlined in B112, where wisdom and virtue are defined as ‘to act and speak what is true, perceiving things according to their nature’.<sup>20</sup> Successful speech reflects the nature of the universal *logos*. One of the most important aspects of the *logos* is that it is common to all mankind. This should be a source of unity, but the opposite is the case. Fragment B2 describes the problem: ‘it is necessary to follow what is common, but although the *logos* is common, the majority of men live as though they had a private understanding’.<sup>21</sup> Men reject the unity that underlies their experience and opt for thinking as a private possession, multiplicity instead of unity.

Poets such as Homer and Hesiod are seen as responsible for this error, as we saw above. When Herakleitos complains that people ‘believe the poets of the people and use the crowd as their teacher’ (B104), he implicitly identifies these poets with the uneducated mob. Neither has any understanding; poetic authority and Muse-based inspiration are dismissed without a hearing. Inspiration is an invalid claim to privileged, and thus private knowledge with no basis in fact. We place ourselves in jeopardy by deriving our understanding from the many (whether they are the poets or our neighbours). All this stands in bleak contrast to the *logos* that is common to all. If nothing is common or agreed upon, language must inevitably degenerate into instability. Each person’s private understanding will transform itself into private meaning and private language. Herakleitos’ aim is to extract us from this predicament, encourage us to reflect the *logos* in our speech, and reject a spurious multiplicity. This brings us back to myth. The mythological world of the poets that Herakleitos rejects is characterised, as we have seen, by the proliferation of multiple versions. It thus embodies the most heinous fault that he diagnoses in human language. The cheerful inconsistency the poets employed in their treatment of myths becomes a sinister paradigm of what is wrong with human intellection.

Herakleitos needs to model the world in a different way. It is something of a shock, however, when his modelling strikes us as moderately incomprehensible although we might have expected it to be accessible and ‘common to all’. His legendary obscurity does not require elaboration here, yet it is worth rehearsing some significant aspects. Let us look first at the famous fragment B93: ‘the lord, whose oracle is in Delphi,

<sup>20</sup> Translation by Kahn 1979: 43.

<sup>21</sup> I follow here the text of Kirk et al. 1983: 187.



neither speaks, nor conceals, but gives a sign'. This has often been taken to refer to Herakleitos' own oracular and Delphic style, but may also look to the complexity of the universal *logos*. Here I follow Kahn in concluding that the important message in this fragment is that an oracle requires interpretation.<sup>22</sup> The language of revelation must be complex, for to attempt to speak too clearly would be to falsify the complex nature of reality. This confirms that Herakleitos feels there should be a correspondence between the nature of reality and the type of language one chooses to express one's insights. The truth about reality has been misunderstood even though it lies in plain sight. The style of previous poets must be an example of oversimplification. Previous writers employed simple style, and were (to a greater or lesser degree) clear about what they were trying to say. But they modelled a clarity that was only apparent. Hence Herakleitos' impatience with their failure to perceive the unity that was before their eyes.

There is an obvious tension here. The true nature of the world should be apparent, *is* apparent to Herakleitos. Yet it has been ignored by those whose style proclaimed simplicity. There is a disjunction between the unity of the underlying cosmic *logos*, and the language that should express it. What choice does Herakleitos have? His predecessors have appropriated lucidity for their simplistic and pluralistic view of the world. He must therefore be obscure, and for two reasons. First, because he cannot capitulate by writing in a style that would group him with the ignorant. Second, because the obscure style more accurately models the nature of reality. It is a paradox: the world is simple and unified (in tension) but does not lend itself to clear expression in language. Obscurity thus models the cosmic unity of opposites, whereas lucidity reflects multivalence and incomprehension. On the other hand, Herakleitos cannot be too obscure because total incomprehension would also be a travesty of the *logos*. He must give a sign, try to appropriate the middle ground between meaninglessness and specious clarity. In a world where people do not perceive the *logos* he fits himself to their incomprehension. This attempt to occupy a position that mediates between non-meaning and an untenable clarity is a substantive, as well as a stylistic decision.<sup>23</sup> It also recalls (although it does not replicate) the deconstructionist schema of Derrida described in the previous chapter, where language occupies a middle ground, shared with metaphor, between truth and meaninglessness. Yet it stakes out this territory purposefully, aware of

<sup>22</sup> Kahn 1979: 123–4.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Snell 1926: 372; Nussbaum 1972: 10–11.

the dangers of too much or too little signification, and forcing us to come to the same awareness.

The problem of questionable linguistic signification carries over into Herakleitos' treatment of traditional religious/mythological figures. We are, for example, told that Justice will overtake the inventors of lies and those who bear witness to them (B28). We cannot attribute full-blown mythological status to Justice here; nevertheless, the personification is indicative. We learn also that the sun will not pass over his measure or the Erinyes, the attendants of Justice, will find him out (B94). The figures of the Erinyes here symbolise the forces of regularity which guarantee the operation of the universe and have been separated from their usual context of avenging kin-murder. It is clear that Herakleitos uses the figure of Justice to express one of the major principles in his universe, yet her role is not that different from what we would expect in a Hesiodic context. The Erinyes are more interesting because we can see here a greater distance from pre-Heraclitean usage.<sup>24</sup> Herakleitos obviously has no worries about anthropomorphising the cosmos. Indeed, he seems to be interested in re-evaluating the role of traditional mythico-religious figures. Why should this be? We can begin to answer this question by looking at B32: 'One thing, the only truly wise, is not and is willing to be called by the name of Zeus.' Again a universal force is called by the name of a god, but this time we are explicitly told that it is not completely satisfied. Although this ambiguity alludes to the traditional hymnic topos of asking a god which epithet he would like, it goes beyond it. The divinity is not invited to choose a preferred title, but the author takes responsibility for stating the god's ambiguous consent to the label. The ambiguity must be due to unwanted mythological baggage. Herakleitos' theory entails the insufficiency of traditional names: Zeus is and is not a good appellation for what the philosopher has in mind. This equivocation mirrors Herakleitos' stylistic stance elaborated above, and expresses the same worries about the perversion of language in a world of fools. The only option left is to give a sign that advertises a complex correspondence between language and reality and makes the reader meditate on hidden incongruities.<sup>25</sup> Names such as 'Zeus' only partly cohere with the phenomena because they have been elaborated by inferior minds.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Kahn 1979: 161.

<sup>25</sup> Havelock's model (1983: 23) of stretching previous language is not adequate to describe what is going on here. Although he is correct to note that the objectified *logos* of Herakleitos forms a single linguistic system corresponding to the system of the environment it describes, the nature of the relationship of 'correspondence' is not simple, nor is it only a question of stretching vocabulary until it fits.

To summarise the case so far: Herakleitos' blanket condemnation of his predecessors does not single out their treatment of myth as especially invidious. Yet his obscurity and revisionist treatment of religious/mythological figures shows his interest in the incongruities of the relationship between language and the world. As was the case with Xenophanes, Herakleitos' thoughts on language entail an implicit condemnation of the world as seen by the poets who are the teachers of the people. Both define themselves in opposition to a tradition of careless discourse. Herakleitos plays with paradox, ambiguity and obscurity to indicate that straightforward declaration is inadequate; ambivalent signification indicates the flaws and misuse previously made of human discourse. The advantage of a sign like 'Zeus' is that it can be made to call attention to its own inadequacy. Because Herakleitos has set himself at odds with the entire wisdom tradition, the same thing will happen whenever he uses a mythological sign or a literary topos. The demand to assess the adequacy of mythological sign to philosophical concept shows us how philosophy can set myth up as a kind of paradigm language or system of signification which, because of the inherently questionable validity of myth as a representation of reality, calls attention to the potential inadequacy of *all* systems of signification. Herakleitos objects not just to traditional uses of the name 'Zeus', but to the misuse of all language, although the 'Zeus' example makes the point with especial clarity.<sup>26</sup> His rejection of the poets and their myths reflects his project to make language exist in a more meaningful relationship with the world.

Xenophanes attempted to transform the poetic/mythological tradition by imposing upon it a different set of ethical and epistemological standards. Herakleitos opted for a different approach. He avoided traditional poetic forms and developed an 'oracular' style in order to model the paradoxical complexity and simplicity of the world. In the next generation the Sicilian poet and thinker Empedokles grappled similarly with the tension between interpreting the world and giving that interpretation verbal expression. Chronologically, Empedokles belongs at the end of this chapter, following Parmenides. He will be grouped here with Xenophanes and Herakleitos because his concerns with religion, anthropomorphism and mortal linguistic and intellectual delusions are analogous to theirs. In one respect, however, his practice differs. He writes a poem that comprehends both poles of the use of language, the radical and the conventional, because it aims to be as

<sup>26</sup> Snell 1926: 374.

inclusive as possible in its teachings. He is a religious practitioner as well as a theoretician, and he shows that a variety of responses to a perceived misuse of language was possible.

The surviving fragments of Empedokles have traditionally been assigned to two poems, one a work of natural science (*Peri Physeos* or *Physika*) and one on religious 'purifications' (*Katharmoi*). More recently, however, it has been suggested that the attribution of the fragments to separate poems is unreliable and based on an incorrect interpretation of a confused doxographical tradition.<sup>27</sup> There seems to be an emerging consensus that Empedokles' philosophy must be assessed as a consistent whole. One implication of this is that one's understanding of Empedokles' physics and cosmology will be closely tied to an interpretation of his theology and ethics. How are these questions reflected in Empedokles' thoughts on language and his self-conceptualisation as a poet?

Empedokles too believes that mortal speech has gone astray.<sup>28</sup> Men's thoughts are blunted, and although they have seen only a small amount in their lifetime, they boast of having seen the whole. They neither see, not hear, nor understand things (DK 31B2; cf. B39). We are reminded of Herakleitos' complaint that most men live as though they have a private understanding, although the *logos* is common to all (DK 22B2).<sup>29</sup> The truth is difficult to grasp: although Empedokles' *mythoi* are true, the rush of conviction into the mind is difficult (B114). Empedokles refers several times to the questionable status of human names. He states: 'a man wise in these things would not divine in his mind that, for as long as they live what they call life, for so long they are . . .' (B15). The point here is the persistence of individual souls in a cycle of metempsychosis: what men call life is really only a portion of a larger whole. Similarly at B8 we learn that 'growth' (*φύσις*) is the name given (*ὀνομάζεται*) to the processes of mixing and separation, but there is no genuine birth or death. His commentary on this idea is noteworthy:

When things mixed into the shape of a man come into the air, or things mixed to make the race of wild beasts, or shrubs, or birds, then men say that this is being born, and when things are separated, this in turn they call unhappy fate. It is not right (*themis*) for them to use these names, but I myself assent to the custom (*νόμος δ' ἐπίφημι καὶ αὐτός*) (B9).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Osborne 1987: 24–30; Inwood 1992: 8–19. Even scholars who believe in the existence of two separate poems argue that their content is compatible (Inwood 1992: 9, n. 15).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Havelock 1983: 18–19.

<sup>29</sup> This fragment has also been associated with Xenophanes DK 21B34.1–2 (Wright 1981: 155).

<sup>30</sup> The text in line 5 is corrupt (Wright 1981: 177).

Empedoclean physics exposes the terminology of birth and death as inaccurate, but Empedokles himself is prepared to compromise about language. As long as we know the true state of affairs, we may for convenience use conventional speech. This is the first indication that any Presocratic poet/philosopher is prepared to compromise with traditional vocabulary. Note that the incorrect use of language is associated with custom (*nomos*).

As was the case with Xenophanes, correct speech has strong ethical import. We note the use of *themis*, 'right', in the fragment quoted above. Empedokles' invocations of the Muses stress the necessity for purity and reverence of speech (B3, B131). There is a similar emphasis in B110. If the listener contemplates certain things (probably Empedokles' own teachings<sup>31</sup>) with 'pure attention', they will remain with him. Finally, the exile of Empedokles' *daimon* under the influence of Strife and his entry into the miserable cycle of metempsychosis, is caused by false speech. We are told of an oracle of necessity, decreed by the gods and sealed by oath. Whenever a *daimon* stains his limbs with bloodshed and swears falsely, he is condemned to wander for thirty thousand years (B115).<sup>32</sup> The oracle, the decree, and the oath all focus on the binding power of speech. In such a context, the swearing of a false oath is especially problematic; when a *daimon* forswears, he creates a separation between words and the world that must then be instantiated by his physical separation from the realm of the divine. This action is connected to the influence of strife, a force that, beside presiding over the separation of words from truth and of the *daimon* from the divine realm, separates the physical elements from each other. Incorrect speech is an aspect of Empedoclean sin, and part of his religious project is to have his auditors purify their language (B3.6–8) as they purify their way of life and refrain from bloodshed. The cohesive action of love, the other major force in the Empedoclean universe, should be understood to cause not just the recombination of the disparate elements into a unity, but the restoration of linguistic cohesion.

Empedokles again recalls Xenophanes as he argues against human conceptions of the gods. The four elements, or 'roots', that dominate his physics, earth, air, fire, and water, are given the names of divinities: Zeus, Hera, Aidoneus, and Nestis (B6).<sup>33</sup> They are not anthropomorphic

<sup>31</sup> Long 1966: 269–73 (truth is materially embodied); Wright 1981: 258–9.

<sup>32</sup> The text of the fragment is corrupt at line 4, but the line end is not in doubt: 'makes a mistake and swears a false oath' (ἐπιόρκων ἀμαρτήσας ἐπομόσση).

<sup>33</sup> On the problematic correspondence of name to element see Wright 1981: 164–6.

gods. In B134 Empedokles declares that god has no head, legs, or genitals, but is an ineffable 'holy mind', which rushes through the entire cosmos with swift thoughts. In the early days of mankind, before the influence of strife, there was no worship of Ares, Zeus or Poseidon (worship connected with the crime of blood sacrifice), but only of Kypris, the force of love (B128). B17 makes it clear that love receives various names from humans, among them 'Joy' and 'Aphrodite'. Traditional gods would presumably be mixtures of the elements produced in the same way as humans and other animals.<sup>34</sup> Because mankind does not understand the universe, that is, the alternation of love and strife, they make mistakes in their worship of the divine (blood sacrifice to divinities that are not the real gods) and in their everyday life (meat-eating). These mistakes are reflected in their imprecise speech; love and strife affect the way people talk (Do we speak truly? Do we break our oaths?). Mankind's best hope is to engage in pure meditations on the teaching of Empedokles and to speak purely.

Given his stress on purity and right speech, how are we to explain Empedokles' assent to conventional linguistic usage? To the extent that the principle of love is not the same as an anthropomorphic Aphrodite, and that the four roots are similarly non-anthropomorphic, one might claim that compromise is damaging. The same holds for human vocabulary of birth and death. This problem is connected with another: how are we to understand Empedokles' invocation of the Muse? When there was a consensus that Empedokles had written two poems, one might suggest that in his work on physics, speaking as a man, he could make the conventional appeal to the goddesses of poetry, whereas in the *Katharmoi* he spoke as a *daimon* and made no such appeal.<sup>35</sup> If there is only one poem, this avenue is not open. The Muse makes no appearance in Empedoclean cosmology and must therefore be a convention. In this case, Empedokles is again compromising with common usage, as he did in speaking of birth and death. But if he is a *daimon* and speaks with the *daimon*'s authority, why is compromise necessary?<sup>36</sup>

The answer is to be found in the relationship between Empedokles and his audience. The hypothesis of a single poem means we cannot say that the work on physics was written for a specialised audience

<sup>34</sup> Wright 1981: 254. <sup>35</sup> Long 1966: 258.

<sup>36</sup> This puzzle remains even if we do not read the opening of the *Katharmoi* as a boastful proclamation of his own divinity, but as an ironic statement about adulatory overkill (cf. Osborne 1987: 34–5; Rösler 1983).

while the *Katharmoi* was written for a popular one. The fragments demand a unified reading.<sup>37</sup> Empedokles speaks to the citizens of Akragas (B112), but also to men in general. There is in addition a particular addressee, Pausanias (B1). The poem aims to be as inclusive as possible in its teachings. If the influence of strife is to be contested, as many people as possible must refrain from bloodshed, even if they do not understand the intellectual niceties of the account of the cosmic sphere. The assent to convention and the appeals to the Muse are compromises. They also reflect Empedokles' superior status. He has passed through a range of lives as *daimon* and has gained wisdom (B129, B117). Towards the end of the cycle of lives, one may become a prophet, singer, doctor, or leader, and eventually a god (B146). It seems likely that Empedokles thought that at least the first four of these categories were united in himself.<sup>38</sup> The coalescence of all four functions confirms that we should expect a particularly wide-ranging kind of poetry from Empedokles, one that appropriates rather than excludes certain elements of the prior poetic tradition. While Xenophanes thinks that all knowledge is conjecture, and Herakleitos that the *logos* is common to all, Empedokles insists on private and special understanding. This is why he keeps the literary topos of the Muses and its associated aura of privileged divine communication. He keeps it, that is, for the same reason that his predecessors exclude it. Nevertheless, his 'compromises' call attention to themselves. We are supposed to think Empedokles' spiritual generosity impels him to tell us the truth in language we have some hope of comprehending. His poem builds on his predecessors' critique of language, but his project is in some ways more conservative than theirs. This preservation of poetic and religious privilege can serve as a transition to a discussion of another tradition that sought to preserve poetic authority.

#### ALLEGORY AND RATIONALISATION

Allegory and rationalisation concede to the Presocratic critique the necessity of applying new criteria of truth and falsity to myths. Ethical anomalies are to be eliminated; incredible supernatural events are to be argued away. Allegory in particular seeks to defend the possibility of superior poetic wisdom. In this short section I shall argue that it provides supplementary evidence of the textualisation of myth proposed in my

<sup>37</sup> Osborne 1987: 32–3; Inwood 1992: 9–10.

<sup>38</sup> Wright 1981: 291–2.

first chapter. I shall defend the proposition that allegory arose as a means of defending the poets against philosophical attacks, rather than as an attempt by early philosophy to appropriate Homer. Finally, I shall outline the reasons why neither methodology could satisfy the linguistic concerns of the Presocratics sketched above.

The first allegorist of whom we know for certain was Theagenes of Rhegion, who was probably active towards the end of the sixth century BC. He was a grammarian who constructed a defence of Homer in which the Homeric text was given two meanings, one surface and one hidden. An example of his method is given in the scholion to Venetus B on *Iliad* 20.67 (=DK 8.2). The account of the battle where the gods fight each other had obviously given offence to some, but it is defended thus:

For they say that the dry battles with the wet and the hot with the cold and the light with the heavy . . . calling the fire Apollo and Helios and Hephaistos, and water Poseidon and Skamandros . . . similarly sometimes qualities are given the names of gods: the name Athena is given to wisdom, Ares to folly . . . This type of defence is very ancient and dates back to Theagenes of Rhegion who first wrote about Homer.

This passage implies that Theagenes engaged in both physical allegory, where the gods are identified with physical elements, and moral allegory, where they are associated with moral qualities.<sup>39</sup> The crucial move is the declaration that myth may conceal many levels of interpretation, which opens the way for the 'ideological' or 'rhetorical' use of mythology.<sup>40</sup> Allegory implies a certain attitude towards the mythological world. It requires the interpreter to regard myths not as variable tales, but to focus on their instantiation as fixed texts, as problems to be solved. This textualisation reflects the advent and spread of literacy. Mythological narrative becomes a genre with its own rules, and one which stands for something else. In the light of the philosophical critique (itself interpretative), myth cannot mean what it seems to mean. The oppor-

<sup>39</sup> Caution is necessary. Another source tells us that Metrodoros of Lampsakos in the fifth century was the first to study Homer's physical doctrine (DK 61A2), and Pfeiffer 1968: 10 notes that the scholion seems to have been derived from a Stoic source.

<sup>40</sup> Veyne [1983]/1988: 43; Detienne [1981]/1986: 67–8. See also Brillante 1990: 96. We might contrast here the oral explication of a Zuni creation narrative described by Tedlock 1983: 234–6. The narrative itself is verbally identical from performance to performance. The work of interpretation is undertaken by different performers who both retell the story (with its fixed text) and comment upon it in their own (variable) words. In the Zuni context, there is no indication that the interpretation is either apologetic or appropriative or subversive. Rather, the emphasis is on making the text accessible to the audience. In the Greek material considered here the polemical context is much more evident.



tunity to impose an acceptable interpretation makes allegory a powerful tool, and it was so used by later thinkers.<sup>41</sup>

There is some controversy, however, over the roots and purpose of early allegory. It is difficult to specify chronologically whether allegory arose before or after the first attacks against Homer and Hesiod.<sup>42</sup> Was it first a means of positive philosophical speculation which attempted to appropriate Homer's great authority, or was the philosophical purpose secondary to a defence of Homer against the attacks of people like Xenophanes?<sup>43</sup> Tate attributes allegorical interpretation of Homer to Pherekydes in the early sixth century on the strength of the assertion in Origen that Pherekydes 'understood' the verses of *Iliad* 15.18 as the words of god to matter.<sup>44</sup> Given that this testimonium comes in the context of Celsus' later interpretation of the passage, we may suspect that various interpretations are conflated. In any case this testimonium is a very small peg on which to hang the assertion of allegory in Pherekydes.<sup>45</sup> More significant is the assertion that the original aim of allegory was positive and exegetical rather than apologetic: since early philosophy saw itself as competing with poetry, it attempted to appropriate poetic myths and assumed that Homer was a philosopher also. The philosophers 'who expressed their doctrines in mythical language, which is to be taken as symbolical and allegorical, may well have been the first to interpret the poetic traditions as though they were conscious allegories'.<sup>46</sup>

As noted in the discussion of Herakleitos above, philosophy did entail (at least for some) using mythical language symbolically. But the impulse to see myth as a symbol depends upon a prior rejection of its literal meaning. Thus philosophical rejection must precede symbolic use of myth if the philosophical account of the world is to set itself up as an alternative and superior discourse and not merely as one which competes with myth *inside* the framework of mythical discourse (as one version

<sup>41</sup> On the Stoic use of allegory (or non-use), see Long 1992a: 41–66. Dawson 1992 gives a compelling demonstration of how allegory can be used to reinterpret culture and society. Of particular note is his suggestion that the allegories of Philo and Clement play on the elusiveness of meaning (2, 91). If this is so, allegory in these authors functions similarly to myth in the authors analysed here.

<sup>42</sup> Pépin 1958: 93.      <sup>43</sup> For the former, see Tate 1927 and 1934; for the latter, Pfeiffer 1968: 10.

<sup>44</sup> Tate 1927: 214.

<sup>45</sup> The precise dating of Pherekydes is disputed. See Schibli 1990: 2, who places Pherekydes' prime in 544–541 BC. Schibli does not rule out allegory in the case of Pherekydes but remarks that enigmatic expression does not make an allegorist, and argues that it is likely that the passage in Origen 'reflects Celsus' interpretation of Pherekydes' underworld' (99, n. 54).

<sup>46</sup> Tate 1934: 105–7, 1927: 215.

among many). This implicit rejection is incompatible with the positive aim of explaining what the poets meant. An allegorical reading of myth presupposes a prior discounting of literal meaning. Mythological expression, or the symbolic use of mythical language is *not* the same thing as allegorical interpretation. Nor is appropriation of a tradition the same thing as interpreting it. There is a difference between saying 'Homer meant such and such when he said this', and 'I think that such and such is the case – and Homer does too.' There is, in fact, no trace of this latter procedure in the early philosophers; it was a luxury that had to be left to less polemic times.<sup>47</sup> Allegory comes into existence as textual interpretation, not appropriation, and the impulses behind them are distinct although related.<sup>48</sup> Any allegorical or symbolic treatment, whether its aim is to defend or to appropriate, is subsequent to the critique of myth and language outlined above.

Allegory was not the only new approach that sought to save face for the mythological tradition. Rationalisation sought to remove the incredible elements from myth in order to recover the historical event that lay behind it. The growth of this methodology has rightly been attributed to the rise of historiography, which subjected the mythical past to critical examination and posited true and false as real and exclusive alternatives.<sup>49</sup> The method operated mostly on the tales of heroes. I shall not multiply examples but shall cite two instances from Hekataios of Miletos and Akousilaos of Argos. Hekataios, active in the mid-sixth century, was one of the oldest Greek prose writers and practitioners of Ionian historical enquiry. The remaining fragments of his work attest a strong polemical tendency in his historiography and treatment of mythology. In his preface he states that the accounts of the Greeks seem to him to be laughable.<sup>50</sup> Although some people told how Herakles brought Kerberos, the famed hound of hell, up from the underworld at Tainaron, Hekataios says that a dreadful serpent lived at Tainaron and was called the dog of Hades. One bite was lethal. It was this serpent that Herakles

<sup>47</sup> The Stoics seem to have practised this kind of appropriation (Long 1992a: 50–7).

<sup>48</sup> Tate 1934: 107 thinks that it is not necessary for the philosophers to have regarded Homer as allegorical; it is enough that their treatment of myth tended in that direction. This blurs distinctions too much. The philosophers were not allegorisers because this would have meant giving Homer and his kind too much ground.

<sup>49</sup> Wipprecht 1902: 8; Nestle 1942: 127, 133–5; Veyne [1983]/1988: 14, 32–3, 46.

<sup>50</sup> The vocabulary of his proem is instructive: 'Hekataios of Miletos narrates (μυθεῖται) in this way: I write these things as they seem to me to be true, since the stories (*logoi*) of the Greeks appear to me to be many and laughable.' The use of *myth*-stem vocabulary is further proof that *mythos*/*logos* vocabulary has no fixed implications as yet. Note also the stress on the plurality of tales, an indication of the move towards a more monolithic and less poetic conception of truth.

brought to Eurystheus (*FGrH* 1 F27). The pattern is clear: mythical heroes and monsters are historical personages and there is no three-headed dog. Akousilaos rendered epic, especially Hesiod, into prose, correcting elements he thought were wrong.<sup>51</sup> Thus Europa was not carried over the sea by Zeus in the form of a bull, but by a real bull, the same one which Herakles later encountered in his labours (*FGrH* 2 F29). Akousilaos' application of rationalisation was inconsistent. Although he removed the marvellous elements from some myths, he left others intact (so that the Phaiakians are engendered as a result of the castration of Ouranos, *FGrH* 2 F4). Evidently, his quarrel is not with the mythical as such; he seems rather to be creating new versions within the tradition with the help of a new methodological tool.

The relationship of rationalisation to the myth it operates on is complex. Myth is not explicitly rejected, but reworked.<sup>52</sup> Rationalisation first acknowledges myth as separate from the everyday world and then, as Veyne remarks, cancels this difference.<sup>53</sup> Allegory and rationalisation thus share an ambiguous attitude to myth, and this ambiguity is ultimately what accounts for their lack of rigour. Given the size and variety of the material with which each method started, it was impossible to proceed to a totalising conclusion and transform the tradition as a whole. There was always a narrative surplus unsusceptible to interpretation. As Sokrates was later to remark, once one rationalises (or, we might add, allegorises) one aspect of a myth, one must then do the same with all of it (*Phdr.* 229d). One never does, however, and thus the end result is the proliferation of uncontrolled interpretation rather than the emergence of a 'correct' understanding. Since allegory is a more 'philosophical' defence of myth, whereas rationalisation is historicist, it is no surprise that allegory mounted a greater challenge to the philosophical critique of myth. It offered an alternate way of dealing with the problems of language. If the primary surface meaning of a text does not conform to the reader's expectations, it can be brought into conformity. Allegory offers an uncontrolled excess of correspondence. From the philosophical point of view, what is insidious is that such a procedure transfers the authority of interpretation from an author to a reader, while philosophy aims to communicate an authoritative vision. If strict consistency is abandoned, one can move from allegorising myth to allegorising language, and it is not far from there to the practice of

<sup>51</sup> Nestle 1942: 133.

<sup>52</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the rationalising approach, see Brillante 1990.

<sup>53</sup> Veyne [1983]/1988: 18.

deconstruction and its allegorical narratives that tell the story of the failure to read.<sup>54</sup> Philosophy cannot engage in allegory or in anything else that suggests a displacement of authority away from itself and towards an open-ended series of interpretations. When it undermines its own authority, it does so in a strictly controlled way that pre-empta a proliferation of undecidable readings.

#### PARMENIDES

A study of the fragments of Parmenides' philosophical poem concerning the possible types of human enquiry provides an opportunity for an in-depth analysis of one suggestive use of myth in Presocratic philosophy. We have argued that Xenophanes defined his philosophical aspirations by excluding poetic/mythological practice. Herakleitos appropriated and transformed mythological elements in order to draw attention to the failings of traditional myth as an adequate system of signification. Both philosophers are concerned with the problematic relationship of language and reality. Yet in both cases poetry and mythology, although important, even crucial targets, are not *structuring* principles in their philosophy. When one moves to the fragments of Parmenides, one is in a different world. Although Parmenides' mythology is non-traditional, his search for knowledge is communicated to the reader through familiar motifs of quest and revelation and is attended by divine mythological beings. His wisdom is expressed in epic hexameters, which, although commonly stigmatised as clumsy and pedestrian, transport us back to the poetic and mythological realm of Homer and Hesiod.<sup>55</sup> What on earth was Parmenides about?

In this section, I shall characterise the ways in which Parmenides chooses to talk about his insight into the problems of being. Treatments of Parmenides sometimes imply that the mythological framework of the poem is a veneer that can be stripped away to reveal pure philosophical argument. On the contrary, mythological elements are integrated into the argument, and interpreting their status is one of the crucial philosophical problems in the poem. Separating Parmenides' *mythos* from his *logos* bespeaks the same tendency we saw in the interpretation of Xenophanes' literary ethics and theology: the desire to tidy up philos-

<sup>54</sup> De Man 1979: 205.

<sup>55</sup> Parmenides may also have included Orphic elements, which would again contribute to a sense of comfortable orientation in a tradition (Mourelatos 1970: 42). For a recent, but unconvincing, attempt to find Orphism in Parmenides, see Böhme 1986.

ophy (separate *mythos* from *logos*) so that it conforms to modern perceptions of its subject matter and method. The idea that literary presentation might have philosophical import is ignored. There is, however, no dichotomy between logic on the one hand, and metaphor and myth on the other. This is to argue in terms which would have been foreign to Parmenides. Problems of mythological style and philosophical content are not only parallel, they are expressions of the same difficulty, the relationship between thought and its expression. Here Parmenides follows in the footsteps of his predecessors as he focuses on the problems of myth as a way of symbolising the difficulties inherent in all language.

Parmenides wishes to make his audience aware of the non-referentiality of what-is-not. He does this through logical argument and by developing mythological figures of presentation that transgress the conclusions of his argument. Both argument and literary presentation problematise the status of the audience; there is a paradoxical incoherence between the world in which we live and the uniqueness and homogeneity of what-is. These difficulties are mirrored in the uncertain relationship of the narrator of the poem (the *kouros*), Parmenides the author, and the goddess who reveals the truth. The goddess replaces the Muse, but the source of inspiration is uncertain. Let us first survey the main features of the revelation, emphasising the close connection between thought and being, along with the key themes of narrative persuasion and conviction. We will then engage in a close reading of the mythological framework of the proem to show how it structures and elaborates the key themes of the rest of the poem. Finally we shall consider the poem as a series of nested fictions that draw attention to problems in the relationship of language and reality, problems of which the mythological framework is paradigmatic.

Parmenides' poem presents us with a first-person account of a journey beyond the gates of the paths of Night and Day, where the narrator meets a goddess who promises to tell him both the 'unshaken heart of well-rounded truth' and the opinions of mortals which have no true conviction. The goddess gives an account of the signposts that lie on the only true path, the path 'is' (ἔστί). This part of the poem is conventionally called the *Aletheia*. Finally she presents a cosmology that is meant to represent mortal opinions on the phenomenal world (known as the *Doxa*). The poem is composed in epic hexameters and owes much to traditional epic diction. Even more significant is the appearance of mythological personalities. Parmenidean hexameters never approach Homeric heights, but the tradition of verse composition allows Parme-

nides to employ subtle forms of echoing and allusion which were perhaps not available in early fifth-century prose.<sup>56</sup> Details of imagery and language are significant, as they would be in any work of poetry, not merely ornamental. Further, there is a significant connection between similar sets of images, such that, for example, the juxtaposition of light and darkness in the proem is a proleptic referent for the principles of fire and night in the *Doxa*.<sup>57</sup>

The core of the goddess' philosophical exposition in the *Aletheia* is the necessity to make a choice (*krisis*) between the only two possible routes for thought, 'is' and 'is not'. 'Is' is uncreated, imperishable, unitary, unchangeable and perfect (B8). Three aspects of this choice are important for us. First, it is formulated in terms of the rhetorical concepts of persuasion and conviction, showing how closely interconnected 'reality' is with one's ability to formulate it in acceptably. The route 'is' is the route of persuasion, for it accompanies truth (B2.4), while the route 'is not' cannot be the object of enquiry (B1.28) because one can neither know nor tell of something which is not: it cannot be accomplished (B2.6–8).<sup>58</sup> Moreover, since 'is not' does not admit of thought or expression, it is incapable of persuading, and thus lacks a primary consequence of truth. The 'force of conviction' (B8.12) will not allow anything to come into existence from not-being. True conviction has driven away coming-into-being and destruction (B8.28). The result of this 'rhetorical' conception of the correct route is to give a critical role to human

<sup>56</sup> Barnes 1979: 155 finds the choice of verse 'hard to excuse', but see Mourelatos 1970: 39 for good general comments on how Parmenides uses traditional epic material and the motif of the journey as a vehicle to 'think new thoughts'. Mackenzie 1982: 7 remarks on the suitability of poetry for encouraging individual thought by suggestive echoes and word play. For a sensitive examination of how Parmenides' language looks to the vernacular of Greek lyric poetry, see Leshner 1994. Coxon 1986: 11 judges that 'the poet relies implicitly on his hearers' familiarity with Homeric contexts to make his meaning clear', but although epic diction lends a sense of familiarity, we do not need to posit specific allusion to understand Parmenides' text.

<sup>57</sup> Contrast the approach of Couloubaritis 1986: 41; 109–10, who finds a method which establishes firm correlations between the different occurrences of images to be reductive and an expression of scholarly disenchantment. He declares instead that polysemy is the key to Parmenides' use of imagery. Yet far from being a counsel of despair, the search for meaningful interconnections between mythical and philosophical concepts expressed through imagery proves productive. Couloubaritis' attempt (136–52) to replace this methodology with Proppian structural analysis and a 'logic of ambivalence' is unsuccessful.

<sup>58</sup> Perhaps crucial here is Parmenides' use of τό γε μή ἔόν. μή 'is the negative of will and thought' (Smyth 2688), and while τὸ οὐκ ἔόν indicates something whose non-existence is not dependent on any opinion, τὸ μή ἔόν indicates something which does not exist merely in the opinion of the writer. τὸ μηδέν therefore becomes the way Greek expresses the abstract concept 'nothing' (Kühner and Gerth 1904, 2.2:197). See Coxon 1986: 182, for the equivalence of μή ἔόν and μηδέν. It is a self-evident truth to state that one cannot conceive of anything which one regards as non-existent.

perception and expression. Second, we should note the vividness of Parmenides' language. Persuasion and conviction are almost personified: the former *accompanies* truth, the latter *drives away* coming-into-being. Nor are these the only quasi-personifications. Justice (*Dike*) does not allow either generation or destruction, relaxing her fetters, but holds being fast (B8.13–15), while mighty Necessity holds being within the bonds of a limit and hems it in (B8.30–31). Third, thought is committed to being, and vice versa. Thinking and being are the same (. . . τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι, B3).<sup>59</sup> The ordering power of the mind allows us to perceive the absent as if present. Since what is cannot be separated from itself, all of reality is equally present to the mind (λεῦσσε δ' ὁμῶς ἀπεόντα νόῳ παρεόντα βεβαίως, B4.1). Also to be associated with these declarations about mind and reality is the beginning of fragment 6. Speaking and thinking ought to be 'what is' (ἐόν), for they are there to exist, but that which is considered nothing does not exist (χρὴ τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ' ἐὼν ἔμμεναι· ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι | μηδὲν δ' οὐκ ἔστιν).<sup>60</sup> Mental activity and speech here claim a strong ontological status, both because they exist in themselves and because they are inescapably bound to existence (if we cannot think it or speak it, it is not). Parmenides continues to emphasise the crucial importance of thought in establishing criteria for reality throughout the close argumentation of B8,<sup>61</sup> even as the themes of persuasion and conviction persist. Given the power of mortal thought the stress on the power of convincing speech is unsurprising. B8.34 is of particular interest: there is no difference between thinking and the object of thought (ταῦτ' ὅν δ' ἐστὶ νοεῖν τε καὶ οὔνεκεν ἔστι νόημα). Paradoxically, perfect thought is both the only kind that can reach its destination, and that which does not move. It is the same as unitary being.<sup>62</sup>

Where, then, do mortals go wrong? The mental processes of most are confused because they equate being and not-being (B6.8–9). The route of mortal thought is unlike that of the narrator (to which we shall return). They are not guided by divinities nor does persuasion accompany them; rather 'helplessness guides their wandering mind' (B6.5–6).

<sup>59</sup> The translation of this fragment is problematic. Kirk et al. 1983: 246, n. 2, render 'the same thing is there both to be thought of and to be'. Fortunately, both versions lead to similar conclusions. We can only think of what exists and our thought is an indication of our own existence.

<sup>60</sup> Or 'What is there to be said and thought must needs be: for it is there for being, but nothing is not' (Kirk et al. 1983: 247). My translation here understands τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ' as articular infinitives (for a survey of the possibilities, see Gallop 1984: 61). Coxon (1986: 182) takes τὸ 'as a pronoun referring to τὸ . . . αὐτὸ in fr. 4 and as subject of the infinitive ἔμμεναι'.

<sup>61</sup> So, for example, B8.7–9, 17–18, and 34–36.

<sup>62</sup> See also Mackenzie 1982: 7. For a survey of interpretations of B8.34, see Wiesner 1987.

They are incapable of making the *krisis*, the choice between ‘is’ and ‘is not’ (ἄκριτα, B6.7), and although they too are carried along as was the narrator in the proem (φοροῦνται, line 6 - compare φέρουσιν, B1.1, 1.25), they know nothing (line 4), in contrast to the ‘man who knows’ (B1.3) and the command to the *kouros* that he must learn all things (B1.28). Their path turns back before it gets anywhere; they cannot reach their destination, because there is no destination for them to reach. The correct route of thought is the route of knowledge, accompanied by the persuasion that engenders conviction. But knowledge, persuasion, and conviction are a result of conceptual rigour. The motifs of conviction and persuasion, *pistis* and *peitho*, are to be understood primarily in epistemological rather than religious terms, although the imagery of the proem and the deployment of the above-mentioned motifs do carry some religious resonance.<sup>63</sup>

Because ‘what is’ is whole and immovable, all the labels that mankind has attached to things it sees are mere names, which it has invented trusting in their truth (B8.39).<sup>64</sup> How can persuasion operate successfully where there is no truth? It now appears that the association between persuasion and truth is more complicated than one might have thought. At B1.30, the goddess stated that there is no true conviction in the beliefs (*doxai*) of mortals and created a contrast between the ‘heart of truth’ and mortal opinion. The reader thus assigned conviction to one of the opposed poles and denied it to the other. In fragment 8, however, one is forced to deal with false conviction. This is a result of the power of the human mind, which because of its ordering capability gives ontological status to the objects of its thought. The route of human intellect occupies a middle ground between that of not-being, which cannot be an object of thought, and being, the only true focus of mental activity.

The goddess makes clear the nature of mortal thought in B6, where the *kouros* is warned to keep away from two paths. The first, as we would expect, is the path ‘is not’ (B6.3), but the second is the path which mortals tread unknowingly, both in the sense that they know nothing and in that what they do, they do without insight (B6.4). The problem is not that we

<sup>63</sup> Blank 1982 argues that in some sense, ‘the choice between the roads is the decision of whether or not to have faith in the Word of the goddess. By extension, the audience must decide whether or not to have faith in the Word of Parmenides’. One might infer that Parmenides appropriates the certainty of religious belief for his new system of logical thought, as Blank implies in his conclusion, but this entails a displacement of the grounds of ‘conviction’ rather than a reinforcement of the importance of ‘faith’.

<sup>64</sup> Reading τῷ πάντ’ ὄνομ(α) ἔσται in B8.38. For the alternate reading τῷ πάντ’ ὀνόμασται see Woodbury 1958.



purposely attempt to endow that which does not exist with existence (which is the first forbidden way of enquiry), but that in dividing what is really a unitary reality we bring in not-being, almost unbeknownst to ourselves. The result is that we believe being and not-being to be the same and not the same (B6.8–9). Thus it is that in the confusion of our thoughts we merge being and not-being, and their proper attributes, truth and falsity.<sup>65</sup> We engender false conviction although we believe it true: the falseness we draw from the way of not-being, the conviction from the way of being and truth. We bind the two together with the force of our intellect and make the third way the goddess talks about in B6.4–9, even though we know nothing. The difference between mortal opinion and the goddess' knowledge is neatly summed up in the concluding lines of the *Aletheia* (B.8.50–2). She stops her trustworthy discourse (the one that engenders conviction: πιστὸν λόγον) and commences a deceitful ordering of words (κόσμον . . . ἀπατηλόν). Only the discourse concerning truth is trustworthy; the rest is mere deception.

The starting point of the *Doxa* is man's decision to name two forms although he should have named only one (B8.53–4).<sup>66</sup> It scarcely matters which is the form man should not have named; as Fränkel pointed out, it is creating a duality which causes the problem.<sup>67</sup> Since reality is one, there should have been no possibility of naming opposites. Once named, however, they are given signs: fire/light and night.<sup>68</sup> The world of the *Doxa* is familiar to the reader on both a literary and intuitive level. The divine figures who inhabited the world of the *Aletheia* are also present in the *Doxa*. In fragment 10, Necessity fetters heaven to contain the boundaries of the stars (B10.6–7); the language of binding and limiting is precisely that used in fragment 8 to describe the modality of being. We also learn (B12.3) of a divinity which steers all things (identified by Aetius with Justice who holds the keys and Necessity<sup>69</sup>). There is no question that modal personifications such as Justice, Fate, and

<sup>65</sup> I am attracted by Brague's (1987) conjecture for the line end at B1.32. Instead of the commonly accepted πάντα περῶντα ('pervading all things' as translated by Kirk et al. 1983: 243), he reads πανθ' ἄπερ ὄντα (interpreting ἄπερ to mean 'as') in order to stress that the things we see, although they are not ὄντα, nevertheless have a relationship of *similarity* to them.

<sup>66</sup> For a discussion of the various possible translations for lines 53 ff. see Long 1975: 89–92; Woodbury 1986.

<sup>67</sup> Fränkel 1960: 180. The two forms in question are not 'being' and 'not-being', since neither of them has a share of nothing (B9.4). Since man does not realise the implications of positing a duality, he does not posit 'not-being'. (See Long 1975: 90–1.)

<sup>68</sup> Mourelatos 1970: 241–4 has pointed out how both light and night possess characteristics of being and not-being. This prevents us from assigning either of the contraries to 'being'.

<sup>69</sup> DK 28A37.

Necessity are completely integrated into the poem's epistemological structure. They are introduced in the proem and continue throughout the preserved fragments, guiding interpretation and constantly emphasising a control over the universe and language that is both personal and abstract. These mythological figures of presentation thus help to structure the narrative *and* the universe. Standing beyond all of them is the goddess who delivers the revelation. How does she fit in? It is now time to backtrack to the proem and investigate the role played by the framework of quest and revelation by divinities. The proem introduces the major theme of the rest of the poem: the confrontation of monism and dualism, and barriers created to true understanding. It also suggests that the narrator transcends time and the path of men. Questions about the nature of this transcendence will bring us to the heart of the problem of the mythological framework.

*The proem (DK 28B1)*

The horses that carry me as far as my heart may reach sent me on, when they had led me and put me on the far-famed road of the divinity, the road that carries the man who knows down to every town.<sup>70</sup> On this route I was carried, for it was by this route that the intelligent horses bore me as they pulled at the chariot, and maidens led the way. The axle in the wheel boxes sends forth the sound of a pipe (for it was pressed on both sides by the two whirling circles of the wheels), when the maidens, the daughters of the sun, make haste to escort me, having left the dwellings of Night for the light, and having pushed back with their hands the veils from their faces.

There are the gates of the paths of Night and Day, and a lintel and stone threshold enclose them on both sides. The gates themselves are high in the air with great doors. Retributive Justice holds the reciprocal keys to them. The maidens advised her with soft words and carefully persuaded her to draw back swiftly the bolt from the gates for them. As they opened the gates made a yawning gap in the doorway, causing the brazen pivots, fitted with dowels and pins, to revolve in their sockets in turn. In this way, then, the maidens drove the chariot and horses straight through them along the road.

And the goddess received me graciously and took my right hand in hers, and spoke a word in this way and addressed me: 'O youth, companion of immortal charioteers, you who have arrived at my house along with the horses that bear you, greetings. No evil fate has sent you forth to travel on this road (for in truth, it is far from the tread of men), but right and justice. You must learn all things, both the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth, and the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true conviction. But nevertheless you will learn these things

<sup>70</sup> For the defence of the conjecture κατὰ πάντ' ἄ<σ>τη, see Lesher 1994.

also, how the things that seem would have to be acceptably, pervading all things throughout.<sup>71</sup>

The poem seems to begin without invocation, plunging us *in medias res* and leaving it to the reader to find her own orientation. There is no talk of inspiration, although the journey with immortal charioteers clearly marks the narrator as a recipient of divine favour. The disorientation is increased by the uncertain identity of the narrator. At B1.24 he is addressed as 'youth' (*kouros*), which leaves open whether we are meant to see Parmenides himself in this role. The self-effacement of this narrator is notable,<sup>72</sup> and philosophically crucial. The goddess' direct address to the *kouros* does not occur until after twenty-three lines of first-person narrative, creating a strong impression of personal involvement on the part of the poet. Parmenides as author of the poem and the *kouros* as narrator exist in an uneasy tension with each other and with the figure of the goddess. What is the purpose of this uncertainty? A desire to present one's ideas as impersonal truth might explain putting the revelation in the mouth of an authoritative goddess,<sup>73</sup> but the tension also functions as a programmatic statement in the face of other, more traditional treatments of poetic inspiration.

If Parmenides had wanted his *kouros* to participate in a standard pattern of divine revelation and inspiration, he had models at his disposal. Take, for instance, the relationship of the bard Phemios with the god who inspires him at *Od.* 22.347. Phemios is self-taught and the god has breathed all sorts of songs into him.<sup>74</sup> Or there is the poetic investiture of Hesiod at *Theog.* 30–4. In both these cases, the inspiring power endows the poet with an ability that he then uses to create songs in his own voice. This is not the case with the *kouros*. In the fragments we possess he is the passive recipient of a knowledge external to himself. He is not miraculously endowed with the ability to, say, construct disjunctive syllogisms. He is a reporter.<sup>75</sup> Parmenides chose to have superior knowledge proceed from the mouth of the divine, unmediated by a mortal appropriation of a divine talent or insight. The *kouros* stands ostentatiously silent, and cannot be identified with Parmenides as the constructor of the poem. Nor does Parmenides speak recognisably in his own voice. I shall return to the problem of authorial reticence at the end of this section.

There is another difference between the Hesiodic and Parmenidean

<sup>71</sup> The translation of the final phrase here is that of Kirk, et al. 1983: 243.

<sup>72</sup> Mourelatos 1970: 16.

<sup>73</sup> So Taran 1965: 31; cf. Couloubaritsis 1986: 158; Gallop 1984: 26–8.

<sup>74</sup> Mansfeld 1964: 250; Fränkel 1960: 159–60.

<sup>75</sup> Contrast here the view of Mansfeld 1964: 251, for whom the revelation is a metaphor for Parmenides' insight of the disjunction of being and not-being.

model of inspiration. For Hesiod's Muses, preference or will is the arbiter of truth. They speak lies or truth whenever they wish. Parmenides, however, does not allow that truth and false *doxa* are co-ordinate domains.<sup>76</sup> Like Xenophanes, who adapted a Hesiodic formula to express a sceptical viewpoint and to distance himself from poetic versions of inspiration, Parmenides has a transformative relationship with Hesiod. His goddess speaks both false things and true things, but she clearly distinguishes one from the other, and does so because she is constrained by argument. The implication is that Parmenides' two-headed mortals have been corrupted by a poetic/mythological discourse that sets up an incorrect model for true speech. The oscillation between truth and falsity guaranteed by the Muses threatens philosophical lucidity and coherence.<sup>77</sup>

As we engage in a close reading of the proem, we will see that the studied cancellation of dualistic imagery is an important literary strategy for Parmenides. His deployment of images mirrors his philosophical conclusion, that we must pass beyond duality to a vision of unity. These images permeate the philosophical presentation in the remaining fragments and create parameters for interpretation. They also provide a clue to the function of Parmenides' mythological presentation. Just as the images of duality in the proem threaten a vision of unity and must therefore be appropriated into that vision, so the incongruity of the coexistence of a mythical and the actual universe finally will become an object of emphasis. The resolution of the tension created by this incongruity is a quest for the reader which corresponds to Parmenides' philosophical one.<sup>78</sup>

The first three lines of the poem give no indication of the exclusive nature of the narrator's journey and mission (as later revealed in lines 27–32). The horses carry him as far as his spirit might reach, along a road that is 'far-famed' or 'of many songs',<sup>79</sup> and it is a road which carries any man who knows.<sup>80</sup> This early impression of accessibility will

<sup>76</sup> Mourelatos 1970: 219. <sup>77</sup> Compare the suggestive remarks of Pratt 1993: 110–12.

<sup>78</sup> Coxon 1986: 13 argues that the journey of Parmenides (the proem) takes place in the world of the *Doxa* precisely because of the presence in the proem of the anthropomorphic deities we know to have been present in the *Doxa*, but this interpretation both isolates the *Aletheia* from its mythological context and ignores the cancellation of dualistic imagery which is so important in the proem.

<sup>79</sup> Mourelatos 1970: 3.

<sup>80</sup> The precise nature of the chariot, the horses, and the *Heliades* remains problematic. No simple allegorical reading is satisfactory, but Coxon's belief that the horses are connected with the *θυμὸς* and the *Heliades* with the intellect (1986: 14) seems plausible. We need not think, however, that the goddess of the proem is a personification of the *αἰθήρ* (14), or that Parmenides' road is necessarily Pythagorean (16).

later be belied by the goddess' statement that the road is far from the track of mortals. As he travels, the axle whistles and blazes because it is pressed by the wheels on both sides. He is accompanied by the *Heliades*, the daughters of the sun, and they too send the narrator on, pushing aside the veils from their faces (lines 8–10). This action reveals them as shining creatures, reinforcing with their brightness the blazing light that streams from the 'burning' wheel axle. When they arrive at the gates of the paths of Night and Day, the *Heliades* must persuade *Dike* (Justice) with soft words to open the gates. She pushes aside the bolt and the gates open. The language here recalls the earlier description of the whistling axle of the chariot, although σῦριγξ has changed its meaning slightly, from 'pipe' to 'door sockets'. In both contexts, Parmenides stresses duality: the door pivots revolve in turn (line 19), as the axle was pressed by the wheels on both sides (line 7). The same strategy is employed in talking of the 'reciprocal' keys of *Dike* (line 14) and the paths of Night and Day (line 11).<sup>81</sup> One tactic in this part of the poem is thus the creation of analogous images or situations, with the analogy emphasised by verbal repetition. Just as the wheel-axle turns, so do the gates. The *Heliades* push the veils from their faces as *Dike* pushes the bar back from the gates (ὠσάμεναι, line 10 and ὠσειε, line 17). The opening of the gates and the pushing-back of the veils symbolise revelation.<sup>82</sup>

In describing the route of the *Heliades*, the poet transforms (among other sources) Hesiod *Theog.* 748–57 on the threshold over which Night and Day alternately pass. Here there are no gates presided over by *Dike*, only a threshold, directly behind which is the house where the two powers wait in turn to traverse the earth. The topography is much clearer and the emphasis is on the exchange of positions rather than on the boundary itself. In Parmenides the focus is on the gates: the vast chasm they make when they open,<sup>83</sup> their fittings, and *Dike* their guardian. The theme of exchange is still present, but the poet stresses the difficulty of passing through the gates (rather than the natural exchange we find in Hesiod). The stress on separation accords well with that on duality, mentioned above, but its significance remains for the moment obscure. The *Heliades* have left the House of Night (line 9) – thus their *anakalypsis* – and are escorting the *kouros* to the gates of the paths of Night

<sup>81</sup> Woodbury 1966: 614 notes the stress which Parmenides lays on the 'idea of alternation'. For him, however, the purpose of this stress lies in the 'implication . . . of an equality that underlies the alternation', and he sees the alternation and equality of Light and Night as the actual governing principle of the physical world, rather than as mortal illusion.

<sup>82</sup> Fränkel 1960: 161.

<sup>83</sup> This chasm recalls *Theogony* 740, where χάσμα refers to Tartaros.

and Day. By line 22 we seem to be in the House of Night again.<sup>84</sup> The presence of the *Heliades* there is partially explained by the Hesiodic allusion. Just as Day waits its turn to walk the earth, so the daughters of the sun may rest in the House of Night.<sup>85</sup> Why, then, do they wear veils? It would come as no surprise to find Night or her children veiled. In the *Theogony*, her house is covered with clouds (745) and she herself is similarly obscured (757), but the daughters of the sun should surely remain bright. That they can veil themselves while in the House of Night is a sign that they share (programmatically) attributes of both Night and Day. Just as, in the world of the *Aletheia*, any dichotomy between light and darkness is misguided, so here in the proem an attempt to characterise the *Heliades* as unequivocal creatures of light would be unsuccessful. If unveiling is a revelation, it is doubly so here, where the poet not only has the *Heliades* uncover themselves, but by this action reveals the unity of two previously opposed conceptions.<sup>86</sup>

The implication of the *Heliades* in imagery of light and darkness takes on further significance when the goddess presents fire and night as governing principles in the world of the *Doxa*. Mortals name two principles when they should only name one. The *Heliades* seem to oscillate between the worlds of darkness and light, but take both opposites into themselves. At the start of the proem, therefore, the *kouros* was travelling a path that was, in its origin, the path of mortal opinion (one which could carry any man); his superior intellect, however, trans-

<sup>84</sup> So DK, and also Furley 1973: 2. The House of Night in line 9 seems the best referent for ἔνθα in line 11, since the only other candidate for antecedent is φῶς in line 10, which is rather unspecific. Furley concludes that 'the journey is not a new type of allegory but a *katabasis* of a familiar kind'. Yet the framework of a *katabasis* would not preclude symbolic content. More importantly, even if the journey is a *katabasis*, it is hardly one of a familiar kind. There is no topographical uncertainty in Odysseus' or Orpheus' descent to the underworld (to the extent, at least, that it is specifically named as a destination). In Parmenides, the close juxtaposition of Νυκτός and φῶς in the text does blur the topography.

<sup>85</sup> It should be noted, however, that knowledge of the *Theogony* passage is not essential for understanding the House of Night. Parmenides fuses several elements in creating his shadowy topography (including *Od.* 10.86). Coxon 1986: 161–2 argues for the primacy of the Homeric, as opposed to the Hesiodic, allusion, and concludes that Parmenides is describing a gate which leads to a realm of perpetual light. He then connects this gate with Numenius' testimonium on the *Doxa* concerning the 'two celestial gateways through which souls descend εἰς γένεσιν (to birth) and ascend εἰς θεούς (to the gods).' This reading presupposes that we read the proem according to the cosmology of the *Doxa*, a procedure which is not self-evident. In a passage so full of epic references it is unhelpful to assert the primacy of one allusion over another.

<sup>86</sup> On another level, we should agree with Blank 1982: 169–70 that the veiling of the *Heliades* is unsurprising, since all modest Greek women would veil themselves when they travelled outside their homes. He is surely correct to suggest that their revelation of themselves to the *kouros* by removing their veils creates a moment of extraordinary intimacy and shows them to be trustworthy guides.

formed it into the path of truth, a transformation symbolised by the removal of the veils and the opening of the gates. An old riddle of Parmenidean topography now solves itself. There has been much dispute over whether the magical journey took place in the underworld or the heavens. Mourelatos observed correctly that the topography is irretrievably blurred.<sup>87</sup> One can now see that to specify one region over the other would have been to commit on a literary level the error of the mortals in the *Doxa*: instead of bringing the underworld and heaven, light and darkness into their primary unity, he would have codified their separation.

The opening of the gates of the paths of Night and Day also signals revelation. This seems almost obvious; the *kouros* must pass beyond them to learn the truth.<sup>88</sup> Yet again, the action proves to have further resonance. *Dike* is a goddess of reciprocity: she is ‘much-requiting’ (πολύποινος), she holds ‘reciprocal keys’ (κληϊδας ἀμοιβούς),<sup>89</sup> and the gates she guards open ‘in turn’ (ἀμοιβαδόν). She is a creature of separation, and thus the *Heliades* must persuade her with soft words to open the gates (lines 15–16).<sup>90</sup> It is precisely because the function of *Dike* is to make distinctions and ensure that the two sides of any equation balance that her action in opening the gates is meaningful.<sup>91</sup> Even in the proem, the gates over which *Dike* presides prefigure the bounded completeness of Being in B8. These gates are bounded by a lintel and a stone threshold: (καί σφας ὑπέρθυρον ἀμφίς ἔχει καὶ λάινος οὐδός, line 12). Later on, *Dike* holds (B8.15) Being, and *Ananke* (Necessity) encloses it all around (B8.31). The *Dike* of the proem presides over a boundary (the gates) that is itself bounded. The firmness of the barrier is thus doubly determined and doubly significant, both as a means of separation and as a paradigm of a coherent set of limits. The revelation that the opening of the gates makes possible is one of unity, a unity which negates *Dike*’s function in the world of mortal opinion. By her act she presents the reader with another picture of the cancellation of separation and transforms herself from the human notion of a Justice which makes divisions to the figure that in B8 will hold fast unitary being (lines 13–15).<sup>92</sup> No

<sup>87</sup> Mourelatos 1970: 15–16.

<sup>88</sup> In Kirk et al. 1983: 244 the gates are the barriers to escape from mortal opinion.

<sup>89</sup> The sense of ἀμοιβούς is obscure. It may mean ‘retributive’ or indicate that the keys make the doors open in turn (Coxon 1986: 163–5). In either case, the implication is orderly succession.

<sup>90</sup> One of the earliest senses of *dike* was ‘boundary, dividing line’ (Gagarin 1973: 83).

<sup>91</sup> Compare Fränkel 1960: 165.

<sup>92</sup> Furley 1973: 4 sees a similar significance in the House of Night as the ‘meeting place where opposites are undivided’.

force of persuasion can work on her then (B8.12–13); she has made the ultimate choice between being and not-being and will allow no process that compromises the former.<sup>93</sup>

The language of journeying that governs the proem controls our interpretation when Parmenides later has his goddess speak of persuasion accompanying truth (B2.4). The picture of persuasion as the attendant of truth recalls the *Heliades* escorting the *kouros* on his way, especially since the *Heliades* themselves were adept at persuasion (B1.15–16). This connection in turn enriches our understanding of the proem; if persuasion accompanies truth, then *Dike* must have been persuaded to open the doors because the *kouros* was pursuing truth. The correct route of enquiry and the route of the *kouros* are in fact one and the same.<sup>94</sup> The connection of *Dike* with persuasion and conviction is reinforced when, in her condemnation of ‘what is not’, the goddess states that ‘the force of conviction will not allow anything apart from it to come into being from what is not; therefore *Dike* has never relaxed the fetters and allowed generation and destruction, but she holds [the fetters] fast’ (B8.12–15). Since conviction is the counterpart of persuasion, we naturally contrast the persuasion exercised on *Dike* by the *Heliades* (which caused *Dike* to trust them and act on her conviction) with the claims of not-being (which has no conviction).<sup>95</sup> In the proem, *Dike* undid the gates, but here she will not slacken the bonds. No wonder, since persuasion accompanies only truth, and the route of not-being is no true road (B8.17–18). Coming into being and destruction have wandered far away because they are not at the end of the road which leads to the truth. They are not even allowed near it, because they have no persuasive power and thus cannot engender the conviction that would allow them to pass through the gates guarded by *Dike*. In fact, true conviction has pushed them off (ἀπῶσε, B8.28). Like the wandering minds of mortals in B6.6, generation and destruction fail to emulate the success of the *kouros* in his quest.

The use of the metaphor of pushing or driving off should alert us to further connections with the proem. The previous instances of this verb (ῶθεῖω) contained intimations of revelation and pointed to the breaking

<sup>93</sup> See Woodbury 1966: 610–11 for the connections between the separate appearances of *Dike*. He suggests that it is ‘of course the ordinary visible world . . . over which she . . . presides’, but there is no indication of this in Parmenides.

<sup>94</sup> Coxon (1986: 12) points out that on one level the road of the *daimon* is not the same as the track of persuasion because, if so, ‘it assumes that Parmenides is told by the goddess what way he is to follow, after he has actually traversed it’. The journey of the proem is indeed preliminary, but it is also analogous: Parmenides was already pursuing truth but had not yet been taught the right method.

<sup>95</sup> For more on the relationship of conviction and persuasion, see Mourelatos 1970: 146–53.



down of barriers between the world of mortal belief and truth: the *Heliades* pushed the veils from their faces and *Dike* pushed open the gates. In this fragment, the world of mortal belief is rejected in order to reflect a parallel revelation. The two opposites, generation and destruction, are dismissed as meaningless, as meaningless as the distinction between Night and Day. To take them into consideration is to place a veil over reality and bar the way to discovering truth. Like *Dike*, Necessity will not loosen its grip on this truth (she holds being 'within the bonds of a limit which holds it in on every side', B8.30–1); one must discard excess intellectual baggage in order to attain it. Only then will one be kept on the correct path and arrive at the only attainable destination. The rigorous process of logical deduction not only keeps being in its place,<sup>96</sup> but keeps us on the track; given the ordering function of thought, one may assert that these two aspects of Necessity are not markedly different. This may seem to create a paradox, in that the same force both guarantees immobility and changelessness and validates a mental journey which moves towards that immobility. This is, in fact, a reflection of a larger paradox, wherein the dialectical context (here, the mental journey) seems invalidated by the conclusions of the *Aletheia* (immobility, changelessness, and so on). We shall return to this point.

Parmenides, then, uses repeated vocabulary to emphasise doubleness, and the polarity he thereby produces is resolved by the opening of the gates of the paths of Night and Day. On a more theoretical level, one might say that elements of dualistic imagery foreign to the unitary Being of the *Aletheia* were introduced into the proem in order to provide a literary model for eliminating the apparent distinctions which form the basis for man's intellectual apprehension of the world around him. The physical 'doubleness' modelled in the proem is analogous to the doubleness of the phenomenal world that mortals posit, and the resolution of the former into unities predicts the reformulation of thought in terms of the One in the *Aletheia*. Thus there are two wheels, but one chariot. There are creatures of light and darkness who effect the transition from one to the other by a veiling and unveiling which can have no effect on their essential nature, and there are two worlds separated by formidable closed gates – which open nonetheless. This reading of the proem is proleptic, since dualism is not logically excluded until the revelations of the goddess, but as we have seen, the model of the proem guides the reader throughout the logical argumentation of the *Aletheia*. We might,

<sup>96</sup> The same thought is expressed through the figure of Fate (*Moirai*) at B8.37.

nonetheless, be disturbed by the troublesome presence of what is excluded. Dualism is, after all, not real. One cannot refer to what is not. Precisely what is the status of those images, or, come to that, those literary personifications?

*Paradox*

For some, the use of epic forms and mythological personages is unproblematic. One might argue, like Mourelatos, that traditional language mediates a new conception of reality. Although the language of the goddess is ambiguous and ironic (the deceptive speech of the *Doxa* has a strong affinity to that of the *Aletheia*) she is fully in control of it. In her speech, she caters both to ignorant mortals and the more intelligent *kouros* (as I have argued Empedokles did).<sup>97</sup> The network of verbal reminiscence which links the poem and the subsequent two sections of the poem thus exists to help articulate Parmenides' message and serve as grist for the ironising mill of the goddess. Another approach is to make a distinction between object language and metalanguage. The metalanguage of the poem would include figures such as the goddess, the chariot, and instances of multivalent language. The object language would be the language of the logical revelation of 'what is'.<sup>98</sup> Is the reader to be disturbed by the appearance of negation, of dualistic imagery, of mythological personifications that are out of place in the ungenerated homogeneity of 'what is'? Does Parmenides' language conform to his own rules for correct discourse? For those who think that it does not, inconsistency is self-referential and expresses a truth about the weakness of language. Others, however, point to the lack of an explicit signal mandating an ironic reading and conclude that the metalanguage may violate the precepts of canonical discourse because we are not told that it falls under the rules for correct speech. It is exempt because it is being used for a higher purpose, that of preparing the *kouros* for his revelation. Contradictions are merely a sign that language is being pressed outside its proper sphere. The object language, on the other hand, is consistent and obeys the rules of correct speech.

<sup>97</sup> Mourelatos 1970: 222–4.

<sup>98</sup> This distinction, and its use to free Parmenides from the charge of self-referential inconsistency, are taken from Austin 1986: 12–17, 40–2. Austin is concerned chiefly with Parmenides' use of negation (that is, is Parmenides' use of negative language inconsistent with his denial of what-is-not).

In fact, the distinction between object language and metalanguage is another resurgence of the *mythos/logos* polarity. The metalanguage corresponds to the mythological veneer, which, as good modern philosophers, we are expected to strip away. We must recall, however, that throughout the presentation in the *Aletheia* Parmenides emphasised the ordering power of the human mind and its implication in rhetorical strategies of persuasion and conviction. This suggests that it is risky to dismiss any part of the poem as a rhetorical presentation that falls outside the scope of Parmenides' philosophical critique. It is clearly true that mythological figures such as Justice and Necessity are powerful symbolic tools for expressing the necessity which attends the oneness, immobility, ungeneratedness (etc.) of being, but if one considers the appropriateness of a mythical presentation in view of the conclusions of the *Aletheia*, greater problems arise. Because the mythical characters are external to the unity of being but not to its exposition, they transgress its monolithic nature.<sup>99</sup> Although a mythical framework is appropriate for the *Doxa*, it sounds strange in the mouth of one who claims that the only correct mode of thought is to think about what is, and that what is, is one, homogeneous and indivisible.

A similar crux is remarked by Mackenzie, that the premise on which the *Aletheia* is based (that one can make a philosophical choice which entails that only being exists) is falsified by that conclusion. The paradox occurs because Parmenides' argument is based upon the premise 'you can think and speak'. The second-person formulation is used throughout the *Aletheia* and is treated as self-evident; this is possible because the claim is axiomatic within a dialectical context, that is, within the framework of two people carrying on a conversation, either the goddess and the *kouros*, or Parmenides and the reader. Parmenides then demands that we, as thinkers, distinguish between being and not-being. However, in the world of homogeneous unity established by accepting this argumentation, there can be no 'you' who thinks as opposed to 'I'. As Mackenzie puts it, in the world of the *Aletheia*, 'the predicate 'other' falls into disuse – so there are no other minds and no dialectic'.<sup>100</sup> Both the dialectical framework of a conversation between the goddess and the *kouros* and the mythological framework of chariot rides and the daughters of the sun seem to contradict the idea of perfect unity, and to assert that one does indeed argue and speak in metaphors which express the

<sup>99</sup> Couloubaritsis states the dilemma trenchantly (1986: 45): if the goddess is real, she is contradictory. If she is fictive, we risk making Parmenides' exposition a fiction.

<sup>100</sup> Mackenzie 1982: 1–3, 6.

truth. The result of these figures of presentation is an emphasis on the act of communication. Why else would one need dialectic, or metaphors, for that matter?

We may approach the problem of tension between presentation and philosophical content from another angle by reconsidering fragment B2. The vocabulary used in this fragment encapsulates the paradox in a context of theoretical comment on the possibility of identifying and communicating a path of thought. The goddess identifies the only roads of thought that there are to think: 'is' and 'is not'. She points out the latter as a path non-susceptible to enquiry (τὴν δὴ τοι φράζω παναπευθέα ἔμμεν ἄταρπρόν, B2.6). Why? Because you could not know that which is not, nor could you point it out (οὔτε φράσαις, B2.8). How can the goddess point out something that cannot be pointed out? How is it possible to refer to something that has no reference? The paradox could be seen as confirmation of the goddess' point about the non-referentiality of 'is not'. Yet if we push harder, troubles return. If the path goes nowhere, how can it be a path at all? How can we talk about it? Yet the goddess does.<sup>101</sup> The change of person and mood in the verb (φράζειν) is significant here. The goddess uses the first person and the indicative of her own activity, but the activity of the enquirer is characterised by a negated potential optative and the second person. Whereas 'I' point something out, 'you' could not do so. What quality of this first person allows indicative verbal expression? It is the goddess' mythological status. Because she stands outside the realm of mortal enquiry, the goddess has linguistic possibilities that we are simply not allowed. A mythological creature, insofar as it is mythological, does not have the same obligation to referentiality as we do. If one is writing a poem about the correct way for mortals to think and refer and communicate, it will be useful to have the incorrect way expressed by a non-mortal in order to avoid the incoherence of having the *kouros* express the inexpressible.<sup>102</sup> The existence of the goddess as a figure of presentation allows a

<sup>101</sup> Mansfeld 1964: 56–61 was the first to realise that B2 contained an internal contradiction examined above, although he did not locate the problem in the verb φράζειν. Rather, he pointed out that in line 2 we are told that there are two routes of thought, whereas in line 7 we are told that there is only one. Mansfeld finds the solution to this problem in a reconstruction of Parmenidean logical practice that sees the argumentation of the fragment as a primitive version of a disjunctive syllogism (*modus tollendo ponens*). Although Mansfeld has identified a real difficulty, we may doubt that he is correct to resolve it by an appeal to logic, however primitive. How informative is it to be told: 'A and B. But not B. Therefore A.'? What is missing is a sense of the importance of context, of the status of speaker and addressee. The fragment deals not only with logical process, but with what is involved in the process of thought and communication.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Couloubaritis 1986: 184.

presentation of what is not that has no positive existential implications. The goddess is outside of our reality.

Does this argument simply reinstall a metalanguage stripped of its problematic features? Not if one keeps in mind the dialectical context between goddess and *kouros*, Parmenides and reader. The goddess is a transparent figure. We may displace the problems of non-referentiality onto her, but we merely postpone the problem, for, I argue, we are meant to see the use of mythological figures as an indication of problems inherent in language. The different linguistic expressions used in the *Aletheia* are products of a human discursive enterprise that is deeply confused: humans conflate being and not-being. How then, does the problem of mythological figures differ from the problem of language as a whole? There is no distinction in the *quality* of the problem. The problem of the mythological frame is more obvious than the problem of language; focusing attention on the former is a way of pointing in the direction of the latter. The difficulty that arises from the employment of myth is emblematic of the predicament that we are placed in by our imperfect use of language. What if no language can express reality? If so, our vision of non-referential language attributed to a blatantly non-referential figure is particularly paradigmatic. It is easy enough to displace issues of non-reference into the mythological realm, since one of the foundational gestures of philosophy is to make myth non-referential. The goddess does not, however, talk only about what is not. She devotes most of her energies to an exposition of what is. But if the goddess is a transparent figure, what is the status of her account of Being? Is it not tarred with the same mythological brush? We have arrived back at Mackenzie's paradox by another route. Parmenidean reality does not admit a dialectical context, nor does it admit a goddess, nor even the space for reference. Neither I, nor a mythological creature can stand 'here' and point to 'there', nor say that 'this' refers to 'that'. There is no room.

On the one hand, we are less likely to take seriously (referentially?) the statements of mythological creatures than a first-person statement of a philosophical narrator. On the other, acceptance of a distinction between *mythos* and *logos*, metalanguage and object language, means taking the goddess at her explicit word and acknowledging the canonical status of the object language she speaks. Yet the goddess is an inserted narrator whose speech is reported. Beyond her stands the figure of the frame narrator and the more distant spectre of an author who may be employing an inserted mythological narrator to achieve a particular effect. Just

as the goddess must be portrayed as taking a position outside the mortal realm in order to comment on it, so her status as an inserted framing element invites us to take a position exterior to that frame, and to evaluate the success and consistency of the poem as a literary artefact. The statement that the metalanguage presses ordinary language outside its proper sphere should give us pause.<sup>103</sup> What is the proper sphere for language? Indeed, the metaphor of the sphere recalls the well-rounded sphere of Being constrained by *Dike*. It enacts the transgression involved in Parmenides' choice of mythological language. Is the 'proper' sphere of ordinary language that of uniform and unitary Being? If mythological and figurative language is 'ordinary,' it is surely not the language of Being. The realms of 'proper' and 'ordinary' language are radically unstable. It is not a simple task to assign the goddess to one or the other. If we were to choose a place where the resources of language are being stretched beyond the ordinary, we might well choose the poem's object language (the revelation of the characteristics of Being), rather than the metalanguage of the poem.

When Parmenides calls up the world of myth and poetic inspiration, he calls it up at a distance of his personal silence. We are intensely aware of the mythological frame as a narrative construct and of the revelation distanced by enclosure in the frame.<sup>104</sup> The goddess does not speak for Parmenides in an unmediated fashion, and it is clear that she does not speak for the *kouros*, whoever he is. Rather, she speaks to him. Any revelation, all revelation, must be mediated by language and is not directly accessible to us. The goddess stands for this mediation. She is not separable except insofar as language itself is separable from thought. For there to be communication, this cannot be so. Still, at the heart of the goddess' revelation lies the dream of language denying itself, an unshaken kernel where Being is uniform and there is no distance between the referring word and that to which it refers.

The poem's movement from myth to *Aletheia* to *Doxa* is a series of nested fictions. Instead of an even progression from truth to seeming to myth, or the reverse, myth surrounds and pervades both *Aletheia* and *Doxa*. This is symptomatic of an overarching problem of language and communication. It may also help us to understand the nature of the strange relationship between *Aletheia* and *Doxa*. Mourelatos has documented how these two portions of the poem are connected by both similarity and contrast; the *Doxa* resembles the truth and is thus decep-

<sup>103</sup> Austin 1986: 40–2.

<sup>104</sup> Couloubaritsis 1986: 66.

tive.<sup>105</sup> I suggest that the *Aletheia* has a similar relationship to the framing element. The proem resolves the problems of mortal dualism on the level of imagery and thus anticipates the conclusions of the *Aletheia*, yet its mythological elements exist in tension with the conclusions of the *Aletheia*, which must logically negate them. The relationship between frame and *Aletheia* differs from that between *Aletheia* and *Doxa* in that the latter exist as parallel accounts of the goddess, whereas the former encompasses two different narrative levels (narrator and account narrated). Yet the *Doxa* is derivative of the *Aletheia*, just as the *Aletheia* depends on the mythological frame. The account of the world given in the *Doxa*, although dependent on the *Aletheia*, is untrue. It is the best mortal account that could be given, but is fundamentally flawed. Similarly, the account of the world given in the *Aletheia* is the best that language can do, but cannot be an exact account simply because it is an account. We know that the *Doxa* is false because we have the *Aletheia*. We know that the *Aletheia* is not the whole story because the frame has made us aware of this reported truth as a narrative construct by invoking a world of myth and poetic inspiration that does not cohere with the truth reported.

The literary framing element represented by the goddess corresponds to 'framing' elements internal to the goddess' account, namely *Dike* (Justice) and *Ananke* (Necessity).<sup>106</sup> We have seen how a divine *Dike* occurs in both the *Aletheia* and the *Doxa*. *Dike* holds fast unitary being (B8.13–15); she may also be identified with the divinity of the *Doxa* who steers all things. Similarly, the *Ananke* of the *Aletheia* holds Being in the bonds of a limit (B8.30–1), while in the *Doxa*, *Ananke* fetters heaven to hold the bounds of the stars (B10). The mythological framework interior to the *Aletheia*, by framing Being within strict logical bounds, enforces the univocity of language by bracing it and insuring that, to the extent possible, words correspond to the philosophical truth. In the *Doxa*, on the other hand, divinity intervenes in the mortal sphere and transforms it.<sup>107</sup> By allowing for physical change, it creates a space for multiplicity and interpretation (like Hesiod's Muses). The divine figures become less figural by intervening. The imagery of the proem and the comments of the goddess teach us to embrace only the first interpretative option, that of univocity. Yet the verbal identity between the two *Dikai* and *Anankai*

<sup>105</sup> Mourelatos 1970: 222–6.

<sup>106</sup> The figure of *Dike* and that of the goddess need not be identical (cf. Taran 1965: 15–16; Mourelatos 1970: 161).

<sup>107</sup> Mourelatos 1970: 235.

make us keenly aware of the constraints put upon interpretation, not only by the rigours of logic, but by language itself. Justice and Necessity can be both modal features of a logical discourse<sup>108</sup> and active deities. The words are the same. It is too simple to assert that in the latter case we can dismiss them because the *Doxa* is false, whereas in the former case we can dismiss them because they are *only* modal. Nothing in Parmenides is *only* modal. The modality we employ, the kind of language we use, constrains interpretation. The duplication of *Dike* and *Ananke* emphasises this constraint and, since the duplication is an element of an inserted narrative by a mythological goddess who may herself be interpreted as a modal feature, the reader is forced to question her own strategies of interpretation and the accuracy of any account.

Parmenides shows us how mythological presentation can be a mode of literary thought with philosophical implications. We have seen how closely the myth of the proem parallels and provides a model for the development of the argument. The elaborate literary structure clarifies, yet also has methodological and a philosophical significance.<sup>109</sup> In the world of human opinion mortals think of myth either as a literal or a metaphorical truth (to the extent that they consider it a truth at all and not merely a capricious poetic invention). Once one accepts the conclusion of the *Aletheia* it can be neither. It is not literally true nor even a symbolic representation of the truth. It is therefore inappropriate for a representation of reality and is rather the discourse *par excellence* of that route of thought which confuses being and not-being.<sup>110</sup> Thus the myth calls attention to its own falsity, and neutralises its incorrect application in the world of opinion. It does not reveal reality, but sets up a route for mortal thought to approach it (as modelled in the unveiling of the *Heliades* and the opening of the gates of the paths of Night and Day). Parmenides writes of a journey from one place to another, but he moves only in the realm of imagination; motion and its absence combine.

#### CONCLUSION

The Presocratics studied in this chapter are conscious of speech as something separate from the speaker which can have a life of its own.

<sup>108</sup> Compare Austin 1986: 111.      <sup>109</sup> Woodbury 1966: 609–10.

<sup>110</sup> Even when myth fulfils most perfectly its function of expressing truth metaphorically (that is, even granted that in some system of discourse and reality myth may be a representation of truth), it still, by its very nature, confuses being and not-being by expressing what is in terms of what is not. This is, of course, a failing of metaphor in general.



Objectification (and therefore alienation) of discourse, the textualisation of knowledge, and the development of abstraction in the philosophical realm proper – all play their part in the development of Presocratic philosophy. By objectifying poetic discourse, philosophers can ‘know their enemy’, but such knowledge is bought at a price. If they alienate poetic language from truth, they must face the possibility that their own language may suffer the same fate. They do not, therefore, simply exclude any trace of poetic myths. Their procedure is more subtle. Far from progressing from *mythos* to *logos*, they retain and reconfigure elements of myth. We have seen how the relationship between poet and the Muse, which was the foundation of poetic authority, is brought into play only to suppress the role of the Muse and assert the accessibility of the truth to the discerning and logical mind. They conjure up the past but put it to new use. By including what is, in one sense, excluded, they demonstrate an awareness of the problem of alienation. We have seen this most clearly with Parmenides. His *Aletheia* mandates the abandonment of negative formulation (‘is not’), of mythological presentation, even of human dialogue, yet all are included in his poem. Only through inclusion can he present a complete picture. Humans tend to proliferate interpretation: Xenophanes acknowledges the role of conjecture, Herakleitos laments the prevalence of private knowledge, Parmenides that we name two (or more) when we should name only one. The poetic tradition, with its commitment to uncontrolled proliferation, is the obvious villain. We have just seen one management strategy at work. It is time to move on to a different, but related, one.

## CHAPTER 4

### *The sophists and their contemporaries*

#### INTRODUCTION

The Presocratics fashioned themselves by challenging the authority through which the poets constructed their discourse. The generation of multiple poetic versions of myths according to no verifiable criterion was, for them, symptomatic of careless intellect. Poetic myths had enshrined unexamined cultural conventions and governed education. The Presocratics treated here responded by creating myths and mythological characters that were responsible to 'scientific' criteria of truth and falsity and reflected potential problems in the application of these criteria. Concerns with the status of myth and poetry were closely connected with questions about the nature and efficacy of language, and myth was used to encapsulate these questions. The language of myth, was not, then expunged from philosophical vocabulary, but its reference was changed. We might call this attitude to myth 'transformative'. I shall call the approach of the sophists and their contemporaries towards myth 'appropriative', since the traditional stories retain their old forms and are manipulated rather than questioned. As we turn to the second half of the fifth century, we find that the same concerns inform intellectual speculation: the nature and power of language, and the status of the poets and their myths. The context of the speculation is different, however. Athens has become the intellectual centre of the Greek world.<sup>1</sup> The rise of the Athenian empire and of developed democracy entailed greater opportunities for political and financial gain for citizens who

<sup>1</sup> By 'sophist' I mean a travelling teacher and lecturer with an entourage of paying pupils. However, in the fifth century (as in some modern scholarship) sophism often lay in the eye of the beholder, and the term 'sophist' could be applied to anyone regarded as a troublesome logic-chopper, like Sokrates. On the fees of the sophists and the connotations of the appellation, see Guthrie 1969: 27–40; Kerferd 1981a: 24–8; Blank 1985. For an exploration of the implications of 'merchandising' wisdom in the eyes of Plato and Isokrates, see Nightingale 1995: 22–5, 30–7, 47–52.

aspired to positions of influence. Influence was acquired and exercised in the assembly and law-courts, and doubtless also in countless local meetings at the level of deme and phratry. Its means was persuasive speech. Those capable of teaching this and related skills found a ready market.<sup>2</sup> If language was a problem for some earlier thinkers, it now became one which had immediate and practical implications.

The sophists teach their pupils to be versatile and successful in the context of the polis. They develop a series of techniques to control the cultural tradition of which mythological poetry was so important a part. As teachers of rhetoric and culture, they combine some of the theoretical inclinations of early philosophers with a more relaxed acceptance of the importance of poetry and myth. They must attract pupils and teach them how to make the most of the cultural materials at hand, and are thus both performers and scholars. If we may trust the words Plato puts into Protagoras' mouth at *Prt.* 316d, far from setting his profession against that of the poets, Protagoras attempted to portray them as sophists, part of a long tradition culminating in himself. This is an attempt to appropriate the cultural authority and respectability of poetry, and stresses continuity of educational history. Protagoras may criticise these predecessors, but a polemic tone is absent. This is not to suggest that the sophists were satisfied with conventional attitudes towards ethics, epistemology, and religion. It is clear that, for some, the challenges of the sophists represent the radical undermining of traditional beliefs.<sup>3</sup> But this does not prevent them from developing their critiques in tandem with, say, Homeric exegesis. Poetic texts are part of the conventional background; the world of the poets and of myth is part of the sophistic stock in trade.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, under their influence the performance of poetry has become so intellectualised that a Homeric rhapsode like Ion can no longer be content with expressive recitation, but needs to be able to interpret the poetry. 'I think that I speak about Homer the best of all men. Neither Metrodoros of Lampsakos, nor Stesimbrotos of Thasos, nor Glaukon, nor anyone else who has ever lived has been able to speak so many fine thoughts about Homer as I,' he says to Sokrates in the dialogue named after him (*Ion* 530c8–d3). The

<sup>2</sup> For a more extensive sketch of the Athenian context of sophistic activity, see de Romilly [1988]/1992: 18–26.

<sup>3</sup> Muir 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Schiappa 1991: 161, who contrasts the practice of Herakleitos and Parmenides with that of Protagoras: 'In both instances *logos* was understood as rationalised *mythos* and was set against a traditional *mythos*. In the case of Protagoras, *mythos* became an object of analysis – a text that could be analysed, criticised, and altered.'

point of all these fine thoughts is to impress the audience; the *performance* of interpretation is crucial.<sup>5</sup>

The performative context of the second half of the fifth century draws under its umbrella performers of all types, from the doctor to the rhapsode to the people we call sophists. The nature of each performance varies according to the nature of the performer and the effect he desires for his speech. Someone like Ion has no theoretical issues at stake when he interprets. Sophists like Gorgias, Hippias, Prodikos, and Protagoras have theoretical interests which form the basis for their teaching. They not only expound a text, but use this exposition as support for their own views. The range of techniques that each performer uses changes, therefore, according to the degree of positive doctrine that is being communicated. No single methodology can be identified with any group of interpreters; we are dealing with an interpretative continuum, not with discrete intellectual subsets, however convenient such divisions may be for modern historians. Deciding whether a particular individual is a rhapsode, a sophist, an orator, or a philosopher is of questionable utility in the present context. Even cases which might seem easy to determine are not so. The audience of Aristophanes' *Clouds* can accept a portrayal of Sokrates as a dangerous sophist. There is still animated discussion over the label we should apply to Gorgias. Is he a philosopher (which would mean that we approve of him)? Or a sophist (possible disapproval)? Or neither, but instead an orator and teacher of oratory (*non liquet*)?<sup>6</sup>

The treatment of myth and poetry by late fifth-century intellectuals can be broken down into three areas. First is the use of myth and poetry as a text for analysis. Analysis of poetic texts trains the minds of the sophists' pupils and provides opportunities for the display of intellectual abilities. The whole world becomes a text for experts to read, interpret, and manipulate. Second, mythological characters and situations are used as ethical prototypes through which the sophists advertise the moral character and benefits of their teaching while also displaying their rhetorical expertise. Third (but partially overlapping with

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd 1987: 83–102 gives a good account of the carnival atmosphere of sophistic *epideixis*. Lloyd's comments on Empedokles, who apparently had his work delivered by a rhapsode at Olympia and liked to walk around in costume, are of particular interest (100–1). Here again, the transitional status of Empedokles makes itself felt; catering to linguistic convention springs from the same root as dressing the part of the sage and rhapsode. The sophists too adopted an aggressive costuming policy at the great festivals (O'Sullivan 1992: 66–7). For an account of the relationship of Gorgias and Empedokles that includes discussion of similarities in literary style, as well as in costuming, see Diels [1884]/1976.

<sup>6</sup> See the variety of essays on Gorgias collected in Montoneri and Romano 1983.

the previous category), *epideixeis*, public display pieces, by Gorgias, Hippias, Prodikos, and Antisthenes document more freewheeling appropriations of myth. Some, and arguably all, these pieces capitalise on the tension created by a pre-existent mythological frame to create an ironic effect that both displays and undermines the power of speech.<sup>7</sup> The role of myth in sophistic thought is ambiguous, therefore. As performers, and trainers of performers, who wish to manipulate the citizens of the polis, they must capitalise upon the resources of myth. In order to do this successfully, however, they must not be 'taken in' by it themselves, but must manipulate without belief. They must decipher the 'text' of myth.

Seeing myth as a text does not entail believing that the individual tales of the tradition are consistent with each other. It bespeaks rather the attitude that the tales and their poetic expression, however various, are pre-existing and static pieces of information which must be interpreted as they stand rather than challenged. This talk of 'texts' is closely related to the textualisation of the poetic tradition. One of the original causes behind objectifying this tradition was, I have argued, the rise of literacy, which led in turn to the possibility of conceiving a gap between language and reality. In the previous chapter we saw how this gap was focused in mythological elements and presentation. Now increasing literacy brings further textualisation as the culture of the book becomes more important. The sophists, indeed, may have promoted the book to a new status, 'given that they introduced a new standard of accuracy in dealing with language and the literature of the past'.<sup>8</sup>

The ambiguity in the sophistic acknowledgement of myth as an important cultural force and an object of intellectual manipulation reflects one of the fundamental distinctions that shaped their contemporary thought world, the opposition between nature (*physis*) and law/convention/culture (*nomos*).<sup>9</sup> There was much discussion over whether convention was a good or a bad thing. For those such as Protagoras it was the force that held together human society. For others (and here we think of those frightening young men from Plato's *Gorgias* and *Republic*) it represented the tyranny of the weak over the strong, and 'natural' right was used to justify the most brutal power politics. In the previous

<sup>7</sup> The Protagorean mythological *epideixis* on the origins of civilisation preserved in Plato's *Protagoras* will be treated in the next chapter.

<sup>8</sup> O'Sullivan 1996: 115–21.

<sup>9</sup> Of the vast bibliography on this subject, I mention here three informative general surveys (in English): Guthrie 1969: 55–134; Kerferd 1981a: 111–30; de Romilly [1988]/1992: 113–33, 148–61.

chapters we saw how poetic myths were aligned by some early philosophers with the forces of 'convention'. Herakleitos and Xenophanes attacked the 'poets of the people' and the crowd; Parmenides and Xenophanes exposed man's dependence on what 'seemed' (*dokos* and *doxa*). This history of perceiving the conventionality of poetic discourse means that the sophists, whether or not they individually believe convention to be a good thing, recognise myth as cultural production, an expression of *nomos* and *doxa* (what people think). In a culture where the majority may still have thought of myths as unproblematically 'true' (existing 'by nature'), this gives them a political advantage. Myths are part of the history of society and hold the polis together. But when *nomos* is disjoined from *physis*, the study of poetic/mythological convention becomes divorced from truth implications. The gap between language and reality referred to above can be redescribed in terms of the opposition between *nomos* and *physis*. 'The way things really are' is the realm of *physis*, and for thinkers like Gorgias and Demokritos, this realm is separable.<sup>10</sup> This separability allows the use of mythological convention by sophists who are agnostic or atheistic, and leads to the development of increasingly sophisticated literary and linguistic analysis. The good speaker must recognise and deploy poetic, mythological, and *linguistic* conventions. It should not be surprising to discover that the weakness of any one of these is the weakness of the others. Language is a series of conventions too.

The power of language was one of the overarching concerns of the sophists, but their attitude cannot be reduced to asserting the pre-eminence of *logos*. Their deployment of mythological tradition displays both the capacities and the incapacities of language. Parmenides generated an ironic tension by creating a mythological frame that could not contain the implications of his philosophy. In at least some of the *epideixeis* to be examined in this chapter, there is a similar tension with the mythological frame. In these instances, however, it arises from the audience's pre-existing knowledge of a tradition exterior to the speech. An increasing textualisation of mythological material produces new possibilities for ironic interplay between words and the world. Given the sophistic focus on teaching effective speech, such irony might seem counterproductive. Yet the subversive separation of any necessary implication between 'truth' and linguistic effectiveness paradoxically opens

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Demokritos (DK 68B9, 125): "'Sweet" is by convention, "bitter" is by convention, "warm" is by convention, "cold" is by convention, "colour" is by convention. In truth there is atoms and void.'

up a new world of possibilities for the orator. These possibilities are anathema to Plato. When he reworks the problem of language and truth, and reasserts a necessary, even if incomplete, connection between them, he does it mostly with less traditional myths, and banishes well-known mythological material from the ideal state in his *Republic*.

#### PHILOLOGY AND EXEGESIS

At *Protagoras* 338e6–339a3, Protagoras declares ‘I consider that the greatest part of culture for a man is to be clever about poetry. That is, to be able to understand which of the things said by the poets have been correctly (ὀρθῶς) composed, and which not, and to know how to distinguish them, and when asked, to give an account.’ This passage introduces an extended critique of alleged verbal contradiction in a poem of Simonides and various competitive attempts at exegesis on the part of those present. Notwithstanding the undoubted elements of Platonic parody in the scene, it may be taken as indicating some of the flavour of this type of sophistic discussion. The exegesis includes quotation of Hesiod (*Op.* 287 ff.) by Sokrates in order to establish the semantic distinction between being and becoming (340d), hortatory quotation of Homer (*Il.* 21.308) and appeal to Prodiakan theories of synonyms (340ab), and Sokrates’ absurd interpretation of the poem in line with his own ethical theories (342b–347a).<sup>11</sup> For Protagoras and the other sophists present, poetry is useful because it provides the opportunity to hone one’s intellect and engage in self-display.<sup>12</sup> The study of words is an exercise in critical thinking and giving an account of a poem is good practice in oral presentation. Criticism is not only good intellectual exercise, but, by making one familiar with the works of the poets, gives access to a body of approved wisdom. Also noteworthy in this passage is the emphasis on criticism of expression as much as of thought.<sup>13</sup> The sophistic interest in correct diction and the correctness of names is well documented. Protagoras’ interest in linguistic propriety and Prodikos’ careful distinction between words of similar meaning are the most notable examples. It

<sup>11</sup> Hippias also has an interpretation ready but is headed off by Alkibiades (347b).

<sup>12</sup> Note Sokrates’ deconstruction of the utility of interpreting the poets at 347c–348a. It is impossible, he says, to reach a conclusion in competitive interpretation, since nobody can ask the poet what he meant. It is far more profitable to argue on the basis of one’s own ideas. This, of course, intentionally misses the point that such exegesis is often not designed to find out what the poet meant, but to manufacture supporting evidence for one’s own position.

<sup>13</sup> Note the stress on correct usage (*orthos*) in the quote from the *Protagoras* above. For sophistic interests in correct diction (ὀρθόειπεια) and correctness of names (ὀνομάτων ὀρθότης), see, e.g. Classen [1959]/1976; Guthrie 1969: 204–23; Kerferd 1981a: 68–77.

seems likely that these studies were not pursued for their own sake but were part of the larger project of producing effective speakers.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, the critical techniques employed in the *Protagoras* are in the service of victory in a larger question, whether excellence has parts, and if so, of what type. The contribution of poetry to educational culture, then, straddles the levels of form and content and is indispensable.

Calling the authority of the poets to one's aid by using a quotation is probably the most obvious and oldest way of confronting the poetic past. Thus Kallikles in Plato's *Gorgias* 484b quotes the famous Pindaric tag 'custom (*nomos*) is the king of all' in order to champion his own view of justice as the right of the stronger.<sup>15</sup> Kallikles is looking not to a myth but to a *gnome*, and it is clear from the discussion of Simonides in the *Protagoras* that it was the gnomic passages of earlier poets which most easily lent themselves to this kind of manipulation.<sup>16</sup> The gnomic mining of the poets is a clear indication of the textualisation referred to above. The tradition is seen as a series of quotations, so that one could declare 'Hesiod says' or 'Simonides says', and choose between various authorities depending on what one wanted to prove.

Hippias took this process of literary excavation to its furthest extreme. His 'encyclopaedia' is the best example of the way the poetic/mythological tradition was systematised and reduced to a series of quotations for research and display purposes.<sup>17</sup> He seems to have created a collection of quotes which juxtaposed related material (e.g. those who think water is the origin of the world), using selections from Orpheus, Mousaios, Homer, Hesiod, other poets, and prose by Greek and non-Greek writers. This is our first evidence of citation not in order to agree or disagree, but as intellectual history. It is, however, further evidence of the dismemberment of the mythological tradition. Greek education had

<sup>14</sup> Classen [1959]/1976: 246–7.    <sup>15</sup> Pfeiffer 1968: 34–5.

<sup>16</sup> Compare the *Contest of Hesiod and Homer*, 75–94, where Homer responds to Hesiod's questions with gnomic utterances. Some of the material in the *Contest* dates to the fifth century. See Hess 1960: 56–66; O'Sullivan 1992: 63–105.

<sup>17</sup> Snell [1944]/1976, further developed by Patzer 1986. In a complex argument, Snell proved that Hippias was a source for Aristotle's information on Thales' theory of magnetism and probably served as a general source for his account of Thales. He then connects Hippias' treatment of Thales with DK 86B6 (Hippias' encyclopaedia). From Plato's *Hippias Minor* 368b (DK 86A12) we learn that Hippias said he took to Olympia poems, epics, tragedies and dithyrambs, and many prose writings. These are most probably other people's writings, and this reinforces our picture of him as a kind of rhapsodic encyclopaedist. Hippias is often said to have composed epic, tragedy, and dithyramb (Kerferd 1981a: 47), but the passage from the *Hippias Minor* does not necessitate this conclusion. Given Snell's thesis, we should identify the intellectual wares Hippias took to Olympia with the *florilegium* of DK 86B6 (cf. O'Sullivan 1996: 116 n. 7). Our best evidence for poetic composition by Hippias is DK 86B1 (=Paus. 5.25.4), attesting that he composed elegiac verses for a Messenian statuary group.



entailed complete memorisation and analysis of texts, so that if one desired to discuss, for example, the difficulty of attaining virtue, one had a store of poetic material to sort through and use to buttress one's point. The educated of all times had mined the poets for suitable *gnomai* with which to pepper their conversation. When, however, Hippias extended the process into the philosophical realm, the desire to appropriate the wisdom of the ancients resulted in presentation of material divorced from its original context. Hippias pre-empted the sorting procedure and processed the material so that it was ready for use. This entailed dismissing context and subjecting a lemma to new interpretation so that it would fit into its intellectual pigeonhole.<sup>18</sup> It is not immediately apparent that Homer means to say water is the 'first principle' (or *arche*) when he makes Okeanos and Tethys the parents of the gods, but so the material seems to have been presented. Reinterpretation of poetic passages led to their fragmentation as works of art.

The sophistic period also saw an increase in literary scholarship, and, unsurprisingly, most work centred on Homer. Critical activities range from etymology to explication of linguistic cruces, to exegesis of puzzling passages, and to broader statements on what Homer is about.<sup>19</sup> Etymologising had been an early feature of the agonistic poetic tradition.<sup>20</sup> Stesimbrotos of Thasos and Demokritos investigated, respectively, the etymology of Dionysos (*FGrH* 107 F 13), and of Athena's epithet 'Tritogeneia' (DK 68B2). Metrodoros of Lampsakos, Demokritos, and Hippias attempted resolution of Homeric linguistic cruces.<sup>21</sup> Even more common than this kind of philological speculation was the investigation of meaning and of literary propriety in certain problematic passages. Demokritos wrote numerous 'musical' works, including ones on poetry, rhythm, and harmony. In particular he wrote a work *On Homer, or Correct Diction* (DK 68A33), where he discussed Homeric seemliness.<sup>22</sup> Other

<sup>18</sup> Compare Diogenes Laertius (9.52): Protagoras 'ignored the thought and conversed with reference to the word'. As Classen remarks, this must mean that Protagoras 'misrepresented single words by ignoring the context' ([1959]/1976: 224). Classen thinks that Protagoras did this to show his pupils the importance of context, but less charitable interpretations are possible.

<sup>19</sup> Richardson 1975. For a detailed discussion of the linguistic and literary contributions of the sophists to the history of scholarship, see Pfeiffer 1968: 33–56.

<sup>20</sup> Griffith 1990: 195. Compare also Teiresias' etymological explanation at *Bacchae* 286–97 of why mortals believe that Dionysos was sewn into the thigh of Zeus.

<sup>21</sup> DK 61A5; 68B22 (Philippson 1929); 86B20.

<sup>22</sup> For example DK 68B23 on *Il.* 7.390. Classen [1959]/1976: 243–4 speculates that his criterion of correctness in Homer was whether 'the poet's expression corresponded to his philosophical doctrine'. It is likely that poetic conventions and language were of interest to Demokritos, given the range of his literary studies. Classen is surely right, however, to suggest that Demokritos will have used Homer as support and confirmation for his own theories, even if he expressed it in the form 'Homer composed well'.

writers came up with varying explanations for why only Nestor can lift his famous cup, among them Glaukon, Antisthenes (frag. 55, Decleva Caizzi), and Stesimbrotos (*FGrH* 107 F 23), who wrote an entire book on Homeric problems.<sup>23</sup> Protagoras also engaged in Homeric criticism on both the philological (DK 80A29)<sup>24</sup> and interpretative levels (DK 80A30). There was also growing interest in the figure of Homer and in broader thematic consideration of his work. Anaxagoras seems to have been the first to say that Homer's poetry is about virtue and justice (DK 59A1.11), while in a later generation Antisthenes distinguished the criteria of *doxa* and *aletheia* in Homer (frag. 58 Decleva Caizzi). Demokritos, as we have seen, wrote on the topic of poetic inspiration and included Homer (DK 68B17, 18, 21). Kritias (DK 88B50), Stesimbrotos (*FGrH* 107 F 21, 22), and Gorgias (DK 82B25) speculated on Homer's lineage, place of birth, and *floruit*.

The above examples document a change in the way intellectuals viewed the poetic tradition. Interpretation focuses on formal and thematic concerns, and myth is studied through the lens of literary criticism. Homer has become an authority instead of a competitor. While Herakleitos would expel him from the rhapsodic contents, Protagoras uses him as an educational tool. When the sophists play with mythology, they deal piecemeal with the stories that interest them, but do not find the tradition itself problematic. The problem of truth, which loomed so large for the Presocratics, seems to have lost its pre-eminent status. Nor should this surprise us. Whereas the figures studied in Chapter 3 concentrated on a metaphysical and abstract truth, the sophists find the concept much more troublesome.<sup>25</sup> The thinkers who are most interested in the problem of truth, Protagoras and Gorgias, engage in more creative manipulation of myth. Protagoras, one of whose written works was entitled 'Truth' (DK 80B1) was famous for the relativism which, crudely put, says that things *are* as they seem to me. Gorgias, while not denying the possibility of truth, nevertheless had misgivings about its communicability and even its relevance, as we shall see.

<sup>23</sup> For the identification of Glaukon with the Glaukos in Porphyry's *Quaest. Hom.* who dealt with the problem of Nestor's cup, see Richardson 1975: 76–7.

<sup>24</sup> Fehling [1965]/1976 reconstructs a sample of Protagoras' Homeric criticism on the basis of this testimonium and DK 80A1, 27, and 28. If he is correct, Protagoras' grammatical comments on mood and natural gender were developed in the context of a critical analysis of Homeric diction.

<sup>25</sup> For the connection of sophistic relativism with their interests in language, see Classen [1959]/1976: 222–4, 228.

*Allegory*

A less polemic attitude towards myth and poetry is reflected also in late fifth-century allegorical interpretation. I argued in Chapter two that the first allegorists were defenders of Homer and the poets against philosophical attacks, rather than intellectuals trying to confirm their speculations through poetic authority. Now that the attacks have moderated, allegorists can make a great authority reflect current philosophical thought. This could be done either as an extension of a private philosophical programme (as with Antisthenes), or as a form of interpretative ostentation (as may have been the case with Metrodoros). The most notorious allegorist of the sophistic period was Metrodoros of Lampsakos, whose linguistic interests in Homer were mentioned above. He was a pupil of Anaxagoras and associate of Perikles, and concerned himself with the poet in terms of 'physical' or 'natural' study (DK 61A2). There is some evidence that allegorical interpretation was a feature of the Anaxagorean school, and DK 61A2 suggests that Anaxagoras himself may have performed moral allegory on the text of Homer.<sup>26</sup> The Anaxagoreans 'interpret the mythological gods: Zeus is mind and Athena is skill' (DK 61A6). Richardson has detected traces of physical allegory which reflects Anaxagorean doctrine in Euripides *Or.* 982 ff. and Plato *Th.* 153c. From these sources he reconstructs an allegory of the *Iliad* passage where Zeus is taken as the 'mind' which directs the universe, and the golden chain equals the fiery *aither* which supports the sun in Anaxagoras' theory.

Metrodoros, however, was something of an extremist. Tatian says that he applied allegory to Homer 'very naively' because he allegorised everything, not only gods but heroes. Tatian summarises his approach with contempt:

For he says that Hera or Athena or Zeus are not what their believers say, who made shrines and temples for them, but that they are natural substances and arrangements of elements. No doubt you will go on to say that Hector and Achilles and Agamemnon, and indeed all of the Greeks and foreigners together with Helen and Paris, are entities of the same nature and were put into the poem for the sake of the composition, not because any of these human beings ever existed.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Richardson 1975: 69–70. He comments that DK 61A2 need not mean that Anaxagoras went in for moral allegory, even if Metrodoros did. Since, however, Metrodoros' work is said to be an extension of Anaxagoras', it is not far-fetched to conclude that Anaxagoras engaged in moral allegorical speculation, especially since Metrodoros' physical (allegorical) speculations are mentioned at the end of the sentence as an additional activity

<sup>27</sup> DK 61A3, translation by Whitaker 1982: 43.

Hesychios (DK 61A4) is more precise. Agamemnon is interpreted as the *aither*, Achilles as the sun, Helen as the earth, Paris as the air, and Hector as the moon. Of the gods, Metrodoros equates Demeter with the liver, Dionysos with the spleen and Apollo with the bile. This is indeed going further than the innocuous Anaxagorean identification of Athena with *technē*. It is difficult to discern whether Metrodoros developed his interpretations as part of a larger philosophical project. The doxographic tradition lacks any indication that Metrodoros had scientific theories of his own.<sup>28</sup> We hear of him mostly in connection with Homer (Plato, *Ion* 530c9–d1), and his allegories appeared in his book *On Homer* (DK 61A3). If Homer were merely illustrative for Metrodoros' theories, one might have expected his book to have a different title. Moreover, if Tatian paraphrases Metrodoros accurately, the gist of the original was more subversion of contemporary religious practice than scientific exposition: the gods are not what the unenlightened think they are, but aspects of nature. This reminds us more of the rationalising Demokritos than of Anaxagoras. Metrodoros' association with Stesimbrotos in the passage from the *Ion* cited above puts him in the class of itinerant professional Homerists.<sup>29</sup> His allegories show how opportunistic intellectuals could take advantage of current philosophical speculation to serve their own epideictic cause. They also prove that such speculation is no longer felt as a threat to the status of Homer: poetic and philosophical traditions reinforce each other.

This reinforcement often makes it hard to determine whether a given thinker is employing allegory or not. Take the case of Demokritos.<sup>30</sup> The range of his literary interests was mentioned above. The two best candidates for Democritean allegory preserved are DK 68B24 and 25. Fragment 25 comes from Eustathius' commentary on Homer, *Od.* 12.63: 'Some people think Zeus is the sun. Ambrosia is the vapours with which the sun is nourished, as is the opinion of Demokritos also.' If the clause 'as is the opinion of Demokritos' modified 'ambrosia', then Demokritos is allegorising, but if it is taken with the clause 'with which the sun is nourished', then he is not. In a comment on *Od.* 15.376 ff., Eustathius (p. 1784 = DK 68B24) reports the various names which have been given to the swineherd Eumaios' mother by commentators. Demokritos called

<sup>28</sup> Richardson 1975: 69 conjectures how the interpretation of the Trojan War could reflect Metrodoros' development of Anaxagorean physical doctrine: the earth is at the centre of the universe, surrounded by air, just as Helen is at the centre of the war, embraced by Paris.

<sup>29</sup> Richardson 1975: 68.

<sup>30</sup> Philippson 1929 surveys the problem and concludes that Demokritos never allegorised, although he may have cited Homer as a forerunner.

her Penia (poverty). It is difficult to draw the line here between allegorical and literary interpretation. The statement 'poverty made Eumaios what he was, was his mother' is allegorical only if made in direct reference to the character of his mother in the text. It seems clear that Demokritos (in line with his ethical concerns) interested himself in moral as well as physical readings of Homer, but context is paramount and this is precisely what we cannot recover. Remarks in a book of Homeric criticism may well have been allegorical, but not necessarily so if made in a scientific text where Demokritos was citing Homeric authority for his own theories.

Antisthenes is a particularly interesting example of how the Homeric text and the mythological tradition could be a springboard for the extensive development of one's own ideas. He was an older contemporary of Plato and a companion of Sokrates, before which he seems to have been a teacher of rhetoric.<sup>31</sup> His works included many essays on Homeric and mythological subjects (Diog. Laert. 6.15-18), and served as vehicles for his ethical interests.<sup>32</sup> There is no firm evidence that Antisthenes allegorised, but he engaged in a closely related activity. He dealt with the ethical implications of the adjective 'of many turns' (πολύτροπος) applied to Odysseus (frag. 51 Decleva Caizzi): the epithet implies knowledge of many modes of speech and the ability to consort with people in many ways. These abilities allow us to characterise Odysseus as 'wise', even though the epithet is not entirely positive. In his treatise *On Kírke*, Kírke seems to have been treated as a metaphor for the way pleasure works on humans; using cunning and spells, not force.<sup>33</sup> Interpretations that see Nestor as a model of self-control, Athena of wisdom, and Herakles of wisdom and strength, grant myth exemplary status, but do not set aside its literal sense.<sup>34</sup> The assertion that Antisthenes' monotheism required him to treat the gods allegorically is invalid.<sup>35</sup> Demokritos' rationalisation of myth did not stop him from talking of divine inspiration, nor did Protagoras' agnosticism prevent him from using a mythological presentation when he wanted to talk about the origins of society (Plato, *Prt.* 320c ff.). The cultural pre-eminence of the poetic tradition means that it is possible to use poetic and mythological figures without implying personal belief.

Figures such as Anaxagoras, Demokritos, and Antisthenes employed methods of presentation that were close to allegory; even if they were not allegorists. This choice indicates something about their relationship to the text. One might suppose that the more a thinker focuses on his own

<sup>31</sup> Rankin 1986: 4.

<sup>32</sup> Rankin 1986: 174.

<sup>33</sup> Decleva Caizzi 1966: 85.

<sup>34</sup> Tate 1930: 6-7.

<sup>35</sup> Richardson 1975: 78.

originality and contribution, the less likely he is to express his thoughts in terms of 'Homer meant' and the more likely to say 'this is what I see in Homer'. The distinction is between the exposition and the appropriation of Homer. The perception that virtue and justice are important issues in our interpretation of Homer could be expressed in two ways. One could say 'Homer's poem is an allegory of the trials of virtue' (this is how the poem is constructed), or 'I have perceived that virtue and justice are crucial to our understanding of the poem'. In the first case, the weight of the interpretation is thrown onto Homer, although individual ingenuity in discovering it is also celebrated; in the second case the interpreter puts himself in the limelight. Allegory is probably a reflex of interpretative intent. Homeric exegetes may allegorise to bring Homer into line with intellectual preconceptions, but when one wants to compare one's own thought with Homer's, one cites him non-allegorically. Given our fragmentary sources, this is impossible to prove. Yet the question of whether someone allegorised is a question about the mode of literary presentation. The fundamental insight of continuity between Homer and late fifth-century philosophy is unaffected by whether one attributes that philosophy to Homer. Modern scholars are often predisposed to deny allegory to 'serious' philosophers like Demokritos and Anaxagoras, but it is a mode of presentation, not of thought. The significant point is that Homeric exegetes take the philosophers on board, while the philosophers bring Homer back into the fold. While Xenophanes and his tradition are anxious to mark the discontinuity between themselves and Homer, their successors in this chapter acknowledge his conventional weight and turn it to their advantage.

### *Rationalisation and atheism*

Acknowledging and manipulating the power of the cultural tradition and its mythological components is most effective when the manipulator is unhindered by belief in its truth. The conceptual importance of the categories of *nomos* and *doxa* in the late fifth century allowed the sophists to divorce poetry and myth from their truth-claiming foundations, and treat them as social conventions to be modified (or codified) for the 'good' of society, or dismissed for one's own profit. Intellectuals could thus engage in a kind of double vision in which they 'spoke' the language of myth in order to access and influence the mass of society, while holding and teaching private beliefs that ran counter to these conventions. This tendency is not only at work in the exegesis and transform-

ation of literary texts. Rationalising interpretations of religious myth associated with the rise of atheism treated the whole of nature and conventional religion as a cultural text. We have seen that rationalisation had a lively history stretching back into the early part of the century. It now became a powerful device in the hands of Demokritos and Prodikos.

Demokritos theorised on the origins of religion and attempted to integrate the mythologising past into his own philosophical system. Our testimonia provide good evidence that he considered the gods an invention: human beings mythologised natural phenomena. In one discussion, Demokritos attributes our notions of divinity to the reception of 'images' (εἰδωλα, B166). In another, we are told that the ancients, seeing meteorological phenomena such as thunder, lightning and eclipses, were frightened of them and concluded that gods were responsible (DK 68A75).<sup>36</sup> This theory is repeated in another version in fragment B30:

A few learned (λογίων) men pointed in that direction which we Greeks now call 'the air' and said, 'All of this is spoken (μυθέεται) of as Zeus. He sees all things. He gives them and he takes them away, and he is king of all.'

What the Greeks now call the sky was called 'Zeus' and given appropriate attributes (omniscience and omnipotence). The act of naming is described by the verb μυθέομαι. The verb must be taken here primarily in its neutral connotation, 'to tell of, to utter', but there may also be a hint of the creation of Zeus as an exercise in mythologising.

Rationalisation is a powerful and versatile analytic tool: the range of human reaction to nature is large and can generate many versions of the gods. In A75 the perception of gods is connected with the emotion of fear; in B30 it is associated with the λόγιοι, the men of *logos*. The connotation of this word is ambivalent: 'versed in tales', 'learned', 'eloquent'.<sup>37</sup> Is the creation of the gods a reasoned deduction from phenomena to cause, or a display of eloquence and persuasion (such as we would associate with the sophists)? Given the *epideictic* character of the imagined scenario, the less complimentary interpretation is more likely. The 'wise men' make a dramatic gesture towards the firmament and propound an audacious hypothesis. The heavens are presented as a text to be interpreted by those who are good at that sort of thing. The mythologising process thus operates on two levels, that of the uneducated and fearful and that of those skilled in *logos*, for whom mythol-

<sup>36</sup> See also *PHerc.* 1428, fragment 16, as discussed by Henrichs 1975: 96–106.

<sup>37</sup> LSJ s.v. λόγιος.

ogising is an aspect of intellectual organisation. It is easy to imagine how such organisation might translate into social control, playing on the fear attributed to the majority. When Demokritos imagines a minority interpretation imposed successfully on the many, he is truly a creature of his age. There may be a place, then, for the mythological in intellectual discourse (as long as one does not mistake it for reality) and this explains why we see Demokritos using conventional mythology-based concepts such as poetic inspiration.

Prodikos also produced a rationalistic interpretation of polytheism. He concluded that 'the ancients thought that the sun, the moon, and rivers and springs and all things in general that helped life were gods, because of their usefulness, just as the Egyptians considered the Nile a god'. Thus bread came to be called Demeter, wine Dionysos, water Poseidon, fire Hephaistos, and so on with other benefits for man (DK 84B5). By a close examination of ancient doxographical fragments, Henrichs has established that Prodikos saw the invention of the gods as a two-stage process. First, man referred to the benefactions of nature as gods and began to worship them. Then the nomenclature was extended to include benefactors of mankind. Thus the gods are not primal entities but by-products of human society.<sup>38</sup> Prodikos' rationalistic treatment of ancient mythological figures results in radical atheism: 'the gods of popular belief do not exist and they lack knowledge, but . . . primitive man [out of admiration deified] the fruits of the earth and virtually everything which contributed to his subsistence'.<sup>39</sup> When tales of gods and heroes are transformed into the basis of a religious system, they threaten to obscure the expert's knowledge of the world and must be explained away.

Prodikos' version of the origins of religion envisages a codification of social priorities. We deify our benefactors. Demokritos' vision turns on fear and, perhaps, intellectual manipulation. The manipulative force of social convention comes explicitly to the fore in the so-called 'Kritias Fragment'. The fragment is probably from a satyr-play, and is cited by Sextus Empiricus in a discussion of atheism (DK 88B25). We are told that the author is Kritias, famed as one of the Thirty Tyrants, the oligarchic junta which caused such misery in Athens in the aftermath of

<sup>38</sup> Henrichs 1975: 111–12. For the examination of the relevant testimonia and justification for attributing the two-stage process to Prodikos, see 113–19.

<sup>39</sup> The translation of *PHerc.* 1428, fragment 19 printed here is that of Henrichs 1976: 15, but altered to take into account the new interpretation of οὐτ' εἰδέναι he argues for. Thus Prodikos emphatically denies the gods' existence and then reduces them to total nothingness by declaring that they lack what was meant to be their most distinctive property (17).



the Peloponnesian War. Other testimonia give the title of the play as *Sisyphos*.<sup>40</sup> Once upon a time, says Sisyphos, life was disorderly, bestial, and subject to force, so justice and punishment were established to prevent unjust deeds. Since this did not prevent covert wrongdoing, a clever man invented fear of the gods, so that man might be afraid even if he acted or thought in secret. Thus religion was introduced with immortal and omniscient gods, and their creator invented an abode for them which was likely to induce fear, the heavens, whence come thunder and lightning. 'In this way', he concludes, 'I think that someone first persuaded mortals to believe in the race of gods.'

The fragment marks the convergence of rationalistic theories on the invention of the gods and the social contract theory which we shall see reflected in the myth of the *Protagoras*. Life was brutish before man established social norms to guide outward behaviour and religion to regulate conscience.<sup>41</sup> If such ideas appeared in the humorous context of a satyr-play, this shows how deeply embedded they were in contemporary intellectual discourse. Unfortunately, uncertainty over authorship and satyric context prevent much further speculation on its implications. If Kritias was an atheist and the author, it is interesting that he felt comfortable inserting his own anti-religious views into a work of popular drama,<sup>42</sup> but it seems more likely that atheistic ideas were ridiculed by being placed in a comic context.<sup>43</sup> Sisyphos was a famous sinner who underwent punishment in the underworld; his atheism evidently caught up with him in the end. Most important in the present context is the cynicism of the presentation. Religion is a form of social control. The tone reminds us of Plato's Kallikles and Thrasymakhos, who despise conventional morality as a rein imposed by the inferior on the ambitions of the naturally superior. Demokritos' picture of the intellectual manipulation of the weak has become a theory about the restraint of the strong. It all depends, of course, on whether one believes social control (*nomos*) to be a good thing. Whatever one's morality, however, the basic lesson is that those who have intellectual control of convention will benefit. There is thus a premium on clear-sightedness about myth.

<sup>40</sup> There is considerable controversy over whether the fragment is more correctly attributed to Euripides than to Kritias, and the question may never be settled conclusively. On the question of authorship, see Dihle 1977 (Euripides); Sutton 1981 (Kritias); Winiarczyk 1987 (Kritias); and Davies 1989 (Kritias). In any case, the words of a dramatic character need not coincide with the opinion of the author.

<sup>41</sup> See Davies 1989: 19–20 for parallels.

<sup>42</sup> The satyr-play, as Davies 1989: 30 remarks, is not an appropriate forum for the airing of serious ideas.

<sup>43</sup> Sutton 1981: 37–8.

The distinction between myth as the grounding for religious belief and myth as an exegetical and manipulative tool explains why both Prodikos and Demokritos could happily talk in mythological terms in some places (as in the *Choice of Herakles*), but not in others, that is, not when there was a question of the actual, as opposed to conventional, existence of mythological figures. This double vision with regard to religion and myth characterised the entire late fifth century. Popular belief in the truth of myths seems to have continued unchanged, even as sophists rationalised and poets like Euripides were taking greater and greater liberties with the tradition.<sup>44</sup> Plays like the *Clouds* of Aristophanes and the various prosecutions for impiety which may have been directed against intellectuals show that the challenge of rationalistic treatments of religion had been recognised.<sup>45</sup>

To recapitulate: the attitude of late fifth-century intellectuals towards myth was conditioned by the textualisation of the cultural tradition. The ethical interpretations of Antisthenes and even the strained allegories of Metrodoros formed one end of a spectrum which started with linguistic investigation of Homeric texts and continued with examinations of Homeric literary method and meaning. A related phenomenon was the atheistic rationalisation of mythological beliefs, which depended on the interpretation of the 'text' of contemporary religious beliefs. The purpose of these approaches was education (for good or ill) and self-advertisement. Indeed, these two purposes are inextricably linked. In order to gain an audience or a disciple, sophists, professors, and philosophers had first to impress with their learning. One might speak of a cult of learning wherein the aspirant to the title of 'wise' (*sophos*) was obliged to master and systematise the store of cultural wisdom as handed down by the poets. The desirability of such a mastery was assumed to be fundamental by both pupil and professor. Both were engaged in the interpretation of a traditional cultural text, an activity which they expected would aid them in the acquisition of speaking skills and in the management and understanding of their lives and the lives of others.

#### MYTHOLOGICAL DISPLAYS

This chapter's focus thus far on textualisation and exegesis has meant that I have not yet considered some of the more substantial remains of display orations (*epideixeis*) in which the sophists invented or created

<sup>44</sup> For popular belief in the truth of myths, see Verdenius 1981: 125; Veyne [1983]/1988.

<sup>45</sup> Muir 1985; Wallace 1994.

variations upon myth. These mythological display pieces stage both rhetorical skill and its ethical and social resonances. Like their less ambitious exegetical counterparts, they play upon the conventionality of language, but in a different way. In addition to conventionality, they dramatise the power and fallibility of language, juxtaposing the text of a speech with an encompassing mythological text, and glorying in the sometimes vertiginous results. The effects with which I am concerned in this second part of the chapter are achieved through mythological role-playing. This is a phenomenon which has been too little appreciated in the evaluation of sophistic *epideixis*, especially since it affected Plato's portrayal of Sokrates. In the *epideixeis* I shall consider first (those of Prodikos and Hippias), the sophists appropriate the archaic genre of 'advice to young men' in order to enact their continuity with prior forms of Greek education. A mythological youngster is confronted with advice on how he should live his life. The educational situation in the myth parallels that of the sophist and his pupil in real life, and thus the sophist/teacher can align himself with figures from the wisdom tradition such as Nestor, or even the more problematic Odysseus. Mythological role-playing is also involved when a speech of defence (such as Gorgias' *Palamedes*) is put in the mouth of a mythological character, and meditates on the conditions and dangers of persuasive speech. Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* is a variant of this scenario. The mythological framework of these pieces, the fact that they are staged, allows second-order consideration of the functioning of rhetoric within them.

### *Ethical paradigm and rhetorical display*

Prodikos' *Choice of Herakles* and Hippias' *Trojan Dialogue* are two examples, both imperfectly preserved, of what must have been a widespread form of sophistic display, the delivery of ethical advice to a youth on the verge of manhood. The advice to work hard and avoid evil deeds must have been acceptable even to the most conservative, and was therefore a particularly useful form of sophistic advertisement. The fullest account of Prodikos' speech is given in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 2.1.21-34 (= DK 84B2), although the speaker does not profess to reproduce the exact words.<sup>46</sup> Here we learn that the sophist recited the speech

<sup>46</sup> Guthrie 1969: 277 comments on the *epideixis* that it 'seems to guarantee its genuineness by being exactly the sort of thing that one would expect a Sophist to compose for recital before a popular audience, conveying elementary moral commonplaces through the easily absorbed medium of a fable about one of the most popular figures of legend'. For bibliography on how closely Xenophon's report reproduces Prodikos, see Guthrie 1969: 278, n. 2.

to large audiences. When Herakles grows into manhood, Xenophon narrates, he goes off by himself to ponder what course his life should take. While he is thinking, two women appear to him, one meretriciously decked out, one severe and stately. The former rushes ahead and speaks first, offering the hero a life of pleasure in unrestrained pandering to his appetites. When questioned, she gives her name as *Eudaimonia* (happiness) but admits that her enemies call her *Kakia* (baseness or vice).<sup>47</sup> Virtue makes no promise of pleasure, but assures the hero of a good reputation and association with the gods through a life of toil. Xenophon finishes his narration with the speeches and does not tell us the outcome of the debate, although we learn from another testimonium that Herakles chose Virtue (DK 84B1).

The *Choice of Herakles* was ideal for public performance because a checklist of virtue (and in this case, of vice) could be extracted from it for personal benefit, just as rhetorical rules could be extracted from *epideixeis* such as Gorgias' *Defence of Palamedes*. Prodikos has not worked with a pre-existing mythological situation (so far as we can tell), but has invented an encounter which borders on the allegorical.<sup>48</sup> He may have felt the need for the invention because he wanted to portray the differences between vice and virtue in the starkest terms. Rather than leaving virtuous and base qualities to be instantiated by well-known mythological characters, where the tradition might have left opportunity for confusion, Prodikos has reduced the variables in the presentation to one, the character of Herakles himself.

Herakles himself remains a blank slate. We know only of the potential arising from his heredity. Presumably, Prodikos' Herakles will go on to become a philosophical hero of the sort we will meet in Antisthenes, or at least a culture hero. The familiar figure of a Herakles enslaved to the physical passions of anger, lust, and greed stands very much in the background.<sup>49</sup> In constructing his *epideixis*, then, Prodikos pre-empts that entire tradition and gives himself narrative priority over any Herakles we think we know. We are meant to keep Heraklean potentials in mind, but the choice comes first. Must we imagine that the passionate

<sup>47</sup> Even inside the 'myth', Prodikos' preoccupation with the correctness of names surfaces. The issue is a crucial one: is a life without restraint equal to happiness or to vice?

<sup>48</sup> Compare the metaphorical language of Hesiod at *Works and Days* 286–92, where he talks of the smooth and short path to Vice and the long and steep path to Virtue that becomes easy once one reaches the top. This passage was probably a source for Prodikos (Untersteinier [1949]/1954: 217).

<sup>49</sup> The brutish Herakles was a favourite character in Old Comedy and satyr-plays. This is, of course, the way he appears in Euripides' *Alkestis* and Aristophanes' *Frogs* and even in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, where his lust motivates the entire tragedy.

Herakles undercuts the effectiveness of the choice for virtue made by his youthful self? Probably not. The character of Herakles had always been ambiguous; alongside the comic, and even tragic, glutton and rapist, was the hero of Pindar's *Nem.* 3 who rid the world of monsters.<sup>50</sup> There was always a choice about which Herakles one could choose to represent. At the end of the fifth century and beginning of the fourth the Herakles who achieves immortality through toil and virtue begins to predominate. Herakles' decision to eschew the pleasures of baseness marks the beginning of a trend (continued by Antisthenes) to reconfigure the hero philosophically.<sup>51</sup> In his *epideixis*, Prodikos returns Herakles to his ethical foundations and prevents negative developments. Even if an audience keeps the passionate Herakles in mind, the contrast makes Prodikos' portrayal of the hero more emphatic.

Thus the traditional title of the *epideixis*, the *Choice of Herakles* is doubly apt: not only does the character choose, but Prodikos himself chooses which Herakles he will represent. The theme of choice is a subtle advertisement for the sophist's art. A simple listing of virtuous behaviour has been transformed into a debate, where the benefits of virtue are set against the tawdry attractions of vice. Each side must attempt to win through argument. Education, then, is not just the assimilation of precepts. It is the correct discernment of one superior argument among many, and it is the sophists who teach the construction and the discernment of such arguments. Traditional gnomic education is given a modernising twist. Moreover, Herakles' choice of virtue over vice is meant to reassure that traditional values are not in danger from sophistic teaching: Herakles' decision recapitulates Prodikos'. The inversion of this moral structure in Aristophanes' *Clouds* shows that the point has been taken – and disbelieved. There 'just' and 'unjust' argument engage in a similar debate, but the deck is stacked. The play sets up a situation in which the only reason for learning argumentative skill is to be dishonest, and unjust argument is an easy winner.<sup>52</sup> In the *Choice of Herakles*, on the other hand, the skill of the sophist is used to laudable ends. Such is the message, in any case. And it is a message not unrelated to those of Xenophanes and Pindar, when they ostentatiously refuse to believe evil of a divine (or in this case, a semi-divine) being. Traditional

<sup>50</sup> Galinsky 1972: 30–8, 81–98.      <sup>51</sup> Rankin 1986: 107–8.

<sup>52</sup> Arist. *Clouds* 889–1114. Although the hypothesis to the play, the *dramatis personae*, and the scholia label them 'just' and 'unjust' argument, they call each other the 'stronger' and the 'weaker' argument. Strepsiades calls the weaker argument 'unjust' (116, 657, 885); cf. Dover 1968: lvii. By having the arguments refer to each other as weaker and stronger, Aristophanes drives home the connection with Protagoras (DK 80A21, B6b).

piety and the desire to advertise the importance of argument form a fruitful coalition made possible by the variety and richness of the mythological past.

Hippias' *Trojan Dialogue* sets up a similar situation, although there is no debate. In Plato's *Hippias Major* 286a–b (= DK 86A9)<sup>53</sup> we are told that Hippias has made a great reputation discoursing on the noble pursuits that a young man should follow. The summary of the lecture runs like this: 'the story tells of Neoptolemos, at the fall of Troy, asking Nestor what sort of noble pursuits a young man should follow in order to achieve a great reputation. After that comes a speech from Nestor, recommending to him a great many excellent and customary (νόμιμα) practices.' The loss of the speech renders detailed analysis impossible, but fortunately this is not necessary for present purposes; it is the mythological context which is of interest. This is specified in Plato by the words ἐν Τροίᾳ ἀλώσει, and in our other testimonium by ἐπειδὴ ἡ Τροίᾳ ἦλω. In the English translation above, this is rendered as 'at the fall of Troy', but it would be more accurate to say 'in Troy which had been captured' and 'after Troy had been captured' respectively. This becomes significant when we recall Neoptolemos' role in the capture of Troy. He was renowned for having slain the aged Priam who had taken refuge at the altar of Zeus, and this act marked him with an infamy which was hard to dispel in the subsequent tradition – a great reputation indeed.<sup>54</sup> The dramatic context of Hippias' dialogue therefore has Neoptolemos enquiring of Nestor how to gain a good reputation while his hands are still (metaphorically) stained with sacrilegiously-shed blood.

How does this incongruity affect our reading? The full text of Nestor's speech might have made matters clearer. As it is, various solutions might be posited. We might say, first, that Hippias is unaware of the problem. This would be in line with his portrayal in the Platonic dialogues *Hippias Major* and *Hippias Minor* as irritatingly self-possessed and almost oblivious to the most mordant forms of Socratic irony. As far as we can reconstruct it, the tone seems serene and Neoptolemos most resembles a schoolboy. The wide reputation of the dialogue assures us that it was

<sup>53</sup> Compare DK 86A2.4.

<sup>54</sup> On Neoptolemos' reputation, see Most 1985: 160–2, and especially n. 113: 'Some articles, by minimising the Cyclic epics and ignoring the evidence of archaic art, provide a far too favorable impression of Neoptolemos' reputation.' Most shows how Odysseus' account of Neoptolemos at the fall of Troy (*Od.* 11.506–40) is carefully incomplete, and how both the *Ilioupersis* and the *Ilias Parva* portray him as a murderer. The evidence of archaic poetry, he remarks, is 'scant but unanimous', while 'the unanimity of [the] pictorial evidence . . . is remarkable'.

regarded with approval; many people must have interpreted it as a textbook of moral precepts in the same way that Gorgias' *Palamedes* could be regarded as a rhetorical handbook. If correct, this solution is further evidence of the fragmentation of the mythological tradition into a series of tableaux, resulting in an indifference to context. We have already seen how the dismissal of context must have been a consequence of Hippias' encyclopaedia. Another solution would be to construct a revisionist Hippias, who denies that Neoptolemos did the evil deeds attributed to him, or perhaps pictures him as repentant and anxious to change his ways. Hippias would then be aligning himself with minority interpretations of Neoptolemos such as that of Pindar in *Nem.* 7. Such a purpose would align Hippias with Prodikos in the *Choice of Herakles*, pre-empting negative versions and asserting the powerful positive effects of education. The rejection of negative versions would not have to be explicit; there is no hint of programmatic rejection in our (admittedly slender) testimonia. Hippias takes the high road.

A variant of this scenario is more attractive. Clearly, if Hippias had wanted to create a situation where youth learnt from age, other moments from mythology would have served. One thinks most readily of the centaur Chiron, who already had a distinguished reputation in myth as teacher to the heroes of Greece.<sup>55</sup> The choice of the fall of Troy as the setting seems deliberate, then. Hippias wanted the paradox of the bloody young man enquiring after virtue. But there is more to it than taking the high road. An affection for the paradoxical and unexpected seems to have been a feature of some sophistic *epideixeis*. We hear of encomia of death and salt,<sup>56</sup> and we shall shortly be looking at one of the most famous paradoxical encomia, Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*. The rehabilitation of an unexpected mythological character is a feature of sophistic *epideixeis*, and is a prestige-seeking exhibition of rhetorical skill. Neoptolemos is an unusual pupil, but there may be an implication that Hippias education can tame even the intransigent, or at least reconfigure them publicly.

The construction of mythological incongruity serves multiple purposes. Nestor's speech packs in a satisfying number of traditional moralising precepts that would win universal acceptance.<sup>57</sup> The incongruity demonstrates the sophist's command over the tradition and his ability to transform it, while advertising his rhetorical skill and the power of his

<sup>55</sup> On advice poetry, see Kurke 1990, esp. 89–94. <sup>56</sup> Nightingale 1995: 100–1.

<sup>57</sup> From this point of view, the myth merely dramatises the argument (Untersteiner [1949]/1954: 273).

education. The connection between Hippias' educational mission and Nestor's advice to Neoptolemos is further strengthened when we consider that in the *Hippias Major*, Hippias appropriates Nestor's advice to himself. He declares 'I gained fame (ἡὐδοκίμησα) by narrating the habits a young man ought to pursue' (286a3-5), but it turns out that this catalogue is actually put in the mouth of Nestor (286b3-4). Moreover, Nestor's catalogue is solicited by Neoptolemos' question about the habits most likely to make a young man famous (εὐδοκίμώτατος). The teaching makes both the pupil (Neoptolemos or his fifth-century counterpart) and the teacher, Hippias/Nestor, famous. Nestor is a cipher for Hippias.

The potential for conflation between a sophist and a mythological prototype is confirmed by an exchange in Plato *Phdr.* (261b2-c2). Sokrates mentions 'Arts of Speech' written by Nestor, Odysseus, and Palamedes during their leisure time at Troy. Phaidros suspects that the name Nestor disguises Gorgias, and that Odysseus hides Thrasymakhos and Theodoros. Does this imply that 'Arts of Speech' were presented by some sophists as delivered by mythological characters? Pieces such as Gorgias' *Palamedes* could be mined for rhetorical expertise, but Palamedes' speech is dramatic and not a theoretical treatise. It could be that Plato is making a subtle joke: Gorgias wrote both epideictic speeches delivered by mythological characters and an 'Art of Speech', and Plato is conflating the two. Alternatively we could take the *Phaedrus* passage literally: 'Arts of Speech' were delivered by mythological characters. Or were epideictic speeches themselves considered 'Arts of Speech'?<sup>58</sup> If either of the last two possibilities is accepted, Sokrates' comment reflects a sophistic practice of using mythological characters as vehicles for rhetorical teaching, just as the *Trojan Dialogue* and the *Choice of Herakles* use them to convey ethical teaching (in a polished rhetorical setting).

The identification of the sophist with a mythological counterpart raises the question of the relationship between his pupils and Neoptolemos. One might suspect Platonic irony here: just as an amoral sophist has insufficient concern for the moral wellbeing of his pupils, so Nestor discourses on good reputation to an immoral young

<sup>58</sup> So Kennedy 1963: 62, who argues from Aristotle *Soph. El.* 183b36 that Gorgias' works did not include any systematic discussion of rhetoric. Instruction was through speeches and collections of commonplaces. On the question of the existence of theoretical sophistic treatments of rhetoric, see Cole 1991, who denies that abstracted rules of rhetoric or rhetorical handbooks existed in the time of the sophists.



man. Hippias will not have analysed the implications thus, but there is a sense in which Neoptolemos is an appropriate mythological persona for an ambitious youth to adopt at the end of the fifth century. Poised between unscrupulous, or even necessary, ferocity and the need for a good reputation, and mediating the opposition through rhetorical skill, the rising politician negotiates a troublesome course. Neoptolemos is a problematic paradigm for a problematic age. Constructing one's public persona in an age of war and empire demands the skill of the sophist. The manipulation of the mythological tradition by Hippias mirrors and resumes this difficult construction.

One last possibility should be considered. Is it possible that Plato has invented Hippias' speech for him to show his mythological ineptitude? The testimonium in Philostratos (DK 86A2.4) would then derive from Plato. Against this one can argue that a wholesale fabrication of Hippias' work would weaken Plato's presentation; he does not attempt to stress the incongruity but moves on to an examination of ethical definitions. We might contrast here his procedure in the *Hippias Minor*, so well elucidated by Blundell. The dialogue begins in the aftermath of an *epideixis* by Hippias on the subject of Homer.<sup>59</sup> He has said that Homer intended to portray Achilles as the best of those who went to Troy, Nestor as the wisest, and Odysseus as the most versatile (364c4–7). Much of the dialogue consists of an examination of the moral qualities of Achilles and Odysseus, buttressed by forays into Homeric exegesis. As in the *Trojan Dialogue*, Hippias is associated with Nestor as the wise purveyor of sage advice.<sup>60</sup> Sokrates' aim, on the other hand, is to dismiss these literary characters as moral exemplars; both Achilles and Odysseus fall short of the standard of knowledgeable excellence. Blundell points out how Odyssean versatility is a latent paradigm both for late fifth-century Athenian democracy and Hippias' own cleverness and adaptability.<sup>61</sup> By indicting Odysseus, Sokrates indicts the democracy

<sup>59</sup> Blundell 1992: 135 suggests that this lecture is to be identified with the *Trojan Dialogue*. This seems to me unlikely. The *Hippias Minor* makes it clear that the lecture was concerned mostly with the Homeric construction of character in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The conversation between Nestor and Neoptolemos belongs in neither of those epics, but would be mentioned, if anywhere, in connection with the *Fall of Troy*. The lecture of the *Hippias Minor* tends towards Homeric criticism, whereas the *Trojan Dialogue* focuses on lists of maxims. Nevertheless, Blundell is correct that both lectures deal with the construction of character, the former by discussing models for emulation, the latter by listing desirable practices.

<sup>60</sup> Blundell 1992: 142.

<sup>61</sup> For literary characters as moral exemplars and the contemporary application, see Blundell 1992: 151, 166. It is telling that in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Phaidros chooses the sophist Thrasymakhos (familiar from his 'might makes right' argument in the first book of the *Republic*) when searching for a sophistic counterpart to Odysseus (*Phdr.* 261c1–3).

and the sophist. In the end, both Hippias and Sokrates have Odyssean and Achillean aspects: the mythological paradigm cannot be imposed, it is suggested, in such a simple-minded way as is done by Hippias.<sup>62</sup> The *Hippias Minor* treats many of the issues implicit in the *Trojan Dialogue*, but does not focus on the potential incongruity of the mythological paradigm. This suggests that the incongruity of the *Trojan Dialogue* is not a Platonic construction. The tension between mythological paradigm and educational content which is exploited by Plato is not evidence of Hippias' obliviousness, but the expression of the tension inherent in sophistic education. The skill with which the sophist deals with this tension demonstrates his ability to function in a complex political environment, weaving together traditional myths and conventional morality with political ambition.

The emphasis of the mythological *epideixeis* we have been considering is the adaptation of conventional morality to the contemporary world in pursuit of conventional success. This process continues in the mythological works of Antisthenes, who, like Prodikos, uses Herakles to illustrate the pursuit of excellence, and who dramatises the intersection of ethics, rhetoric, and pragmatism in the paired speeches of Ajax and Odysseus. Julian associates Antisthenes with Plato and Xenophon in his use of myth: 'Xenophon too, and Antisthenes and Plato plainly used *mythoi* often. So it is clear that the writing of myths (μυθογραφία) is fitting for a certain type of philosopher – even if not for the Cynic' (*Or.* 7. 215c; 216d–217a = fragments B8b, 8c Decleva Caizzi). Shortly after, he highlights the use of myth in the construction of ethical paradigms:

Antisthenes and Xenophon and Plato himself mixed the writing of myths [into their philosophy] when they were treating ethical questions, harmoniously and not as an appendage. If indeed you wished to imitate them you ought to get hold of the name of some Theseus or Perseus instead of Herakles, and stamp upon it the method of Antisthenes, and instead of setting the scene as Prodikos does with those two goddesses [a reference to the *Choice of Herakles*], you ought to introduce another similar setting into your theatre.

The message of the oration as a whole is that its addressee, the Cynic Herakleios, has employed impious and offensive versions of myth. This passage, however, stresses nominal (quite literally) mythological variation together with continuity of ethical theme, rather than the necessity

<sup>62</sup> Blundell 1992. Hippias and Odysseus: 151–2; Hippias and Achilles: 167; Sokrates and Achilles or Odysseus: 164, 168–9. Plato's practice of extending the application of epideictic mythological characters to the interlocutors in the dialogue is duplicated in his *Protagoras*, as the next chapter will show.

of treating one's mythological exemplars with reverence.<sup>63</sup> The message which the latter-day mythographer will deliver will be the same, only the names will be changed.<sup>64</sup> Clearly, the dressing of ethical advice in mythological clothing is a commonplace by late antiquity. The tone of Julian's remarks suggests that *any* mythological hero will do for the purpose. Here we see the end of the process of decontextualisation, as individual heroes lose their specificity and become 'Hero'. Can we see this process at work in Antisthenes' Herakles? This character was famous enough to have become a topos, one which could be mentioned in the same breath with Prodikos' *Choice of Herakles*. Since it had such a long-lasting impact, it merits further examination.<sup>65</sup>

In his work on Herakles, Antisthenes stated that the goal of life is to live in accordance with virtue (frag. 22 Decleva Caizzi). Herakles strives to achieve this goal. When he visits the centaur Chiron, his motive is love, and he does him no harm (contrast his other contacts with centaurs) but obeys him (frag. 24A). In fragment 27, Prometheus tells Herakles that he thinks too much on worldly matters. He will not be a complete human being until he realises that there are higher things. Until then he will be as unenlightened as an animal. Rankin reconstructs a story where an animalistic and primitive Herakles, familiar from Old Comedy and satyr-plays, stands in need of the spiritual regeneration to be received from Chiron. One of the themes of the work would thus be education, and there might be traces of a Prodikos-like *Choice of Herakles*.<sup>66</sup> The evidence of the fragments is scanty; there is no certain trace of a primitive Herakles who needs education. If we press the comparison with Prodikos we might think rather of an innately talented man on a quest for those who can tell him how to structure his life. The most likely form of the work is the quest of the hero to live a life of virtue, and this fits well with the questing structure of the Herakles myth.

Antisthenes' version of the myth of Herakles shows the same method at work as in his interpretations of Homer. Traditional material is mined to teach ethical lessons. There is a difference, however, in the amount of manipulation each allows. In his Homeric interpretations, Antisthenes is tied to the text of Homer and acts as an exegete. This is to his

<sup>63</sup> The latter possibility is argued by Decleva Caizzi 1966: 88.

<sup>64</sup> Thus it is not so much Antisthenes' reverence which is at stake as his moral imperative.

<sup>65</sup> Herodotos, Antisthenes' contemporary, wrote seventeen books on Herakles. They are said to have included allegorical interpretations (Rankin 1986: 107–8).

<sup>66</sup> Rankin 1986: 105–6.

advantage because Homer is a pre-eminent authority on all aspects of human existence; Antisthenes' ethical and rhetorical theories sit underneath his protective mantle. Yet the mantle is also a constraint. Sometimes it would be more convenient to create one's own material for exegesis. While Homeric interpretation was clearly an indispensable aspect of any thinker's intellectual authority in the late fifth century, the text of Homer was too static to allow creativity for those who wanted a more dynamic relationship with myth. In the case of Antisthenes we can see a natural transition from a 'scholarly' approach to the creative manipulation of myth. This is not to say that Antisthenes 'invented' Herakles' encounters with Prometheus and Chiron, but within that pre-existing framework he could freely create motives and details of interaction.<sup>67</sup> The figure of the hero is totally subordinated to the ethical message, however, and has no life of its own. One implication of the passage from Julian cited above may be that the events in Antisthenes' *Herakles* are all variations on the scenario represented by the two goddesses in the *Choice of Herakles*. The strength of the ethical mission overpowers any possibility of incongruity.

*Mythological epideixis and arts of speech*

The situation is slightly different in the paired speeches of Ajax and Odysseus, represented as delivered in the contest over the arms of Achilles. This contest had a long literary history stretching back into the epic cycle.<sup>68</sup> At stake was precisely what it meant to be the 'best' of the Achaeans.<sup>69</sup> From an early point this question had centred on the opposition between physical prowess and cleverness, the former being represented by Ajax and Achilles, and the latter by the wily Odysseus. The awarding of the arms to Odysseus led to the disgrace and suicide of Ajax, and there was a strong tradition that his victory was gained through connivance and foul play (thus Pindar, *Nem.* 8.21-34). We saw above how Hippias constructed an *epideixis* around the question of which Homeric characters were superlative and in what respects. In particular, the character of Odysseus stood out as a mythological analogue for the versatility of the sophist and the late fifth-century Athenian. In the Antisthenic debate the same questions are at issue, this time with an added fillip. In addition to ethical questions concerning the appropriate

<sup>67</sup> Griffith 1983: 302, speculates that the scene in Antisthenes' *Herakles* where Prometheus enlightens the hero as to man's proper conduct may owe something to the *Prometheus Lyomenos*.

<sup>68</sup> Stanford 1954: 92. <sup>69</sup> Nagy 1979: 22-5, 43-9.

paradigm of excellence, Antisthenes lays implicit emphasis on the role of rhetorical expertise in the decision-making process and thus brings the mythological situation down into the fifth and fourth centuries.

The speech of Ajax shows a profound distrust of the power of speech; words are not true criteria by which to judge reality. Excellence (*aretē*) depends on deeds not words, for without deeds, a war cannot be won (7-9). Ajax despises Odysseus' subtlety and linguistic cleverness and cannot see how a base act, such as Odysseus' theft of the talismanic Palladium from Troy while in disguise, could be considered honourable (3, 6). Ajax's distrust of speech goes beyond his disapproval of Odysseus' verbal facility; it extends even to the contest in which he is currently involved. His judges, he claims, have no direct knowledge of the facts and therefore have no true authority (1). They are mere speculators (δοξασταί, 8). Even his colleagues, the kings, have no knowledge of *aretē*, otherwise they would not have delegated such a decision to a jury (4). Ajax thus creates a situation where victory can be gained only if the framework of judgement is dismantled. By denying competent judicial authority even to his fellow soldiers who might be expected to be the most able, he renders a solution on any terms impossible.

This is an intellectual failure, for only a recognition of the necessity of speech as mediator of reality makes human interaction possible. Ajax creates a dichotomy between *logos* and *ergon*, word and deed, but does not stop to consider that speech may be a deed in itself. If the jury fails to make the correct decision, they 'will realise that speech (*logos*) has no strength in relation to action (*ergon*)' (7). This declaration expresses the relative inefficacy of words when compared to deeds, but it also (although not to Ajax) brings up the problem of *correspondence* between word and deed. The wrong judgement sets language adrift from reality. This drift is at once the danger and the glory of sophistic rhetorical expertise. Ajax is right to be concerned, but his simplistic disjunction of *logos* and *ergon* is insufficient for the complexity of the subject. He would do without language altogether, if he could. Ajax creates a similar effect with his assertion that 'War is decided not by word but by deed. You can't contradict (οὐδ' ἀντιλέγειν ἔξεστι) an enemy when you are fighting him; you must either fight and win or be enslaved in silence' (7). Ajax means that oratorical skill is no good in a fight, but the wording of the sentence recalls one of the most notorious sophistic paradoxes, that contradiction is impossible (οὐκ ἔστιν ἀντιλέγειν). If someone says what is not so, his speech is empty of reference and he is not talking at all.<sup>70</sup> All unawares, Ajax brings up the problem of the content of linguistic reference. His

speech thus touches upon some of the fundamental problems of rhetoric, but in such a way that he naively makes a point that has further resonance for the discerning listener. Ajax speaks in fifth-century polarities without understanding them. Mythological incongruity highlights the problematic relationship between language and the world.

The audience of the speech perceives the impasse created by the hero's lack of insight. It finds its perception validated by the mythological tradition which provides the context of the debate: Ajax's suicide is proof of his failure to come to terms with his society. Indeed, without prior knowledge of his fate, it is impossible to read the speech successfully, for it is the tension between our superior knowledge and Ajax's perception of his world which makes his speech poignant, and meaningful – the familiar experience of dramatic irony. Nor does it matter whether we think Ajax inherently admirable and Odysseus base, for the mythological context proves Ajax factually wrong: Odysseus did not sell the armour, as Ajax says he will (3), and Odysseus' cunning was indeed responsible for the fall of Troy.

Ajax's attitude represents a political as well as an intellectual failure. One might well subtitle his speech 'How not to address an Athenian jury'. Antisthenes has transferred the debate over the arms to a judicial setting that recalls the Athenian courts where large jury panels sat in judgement over their fellow citizens. In such a situation, Ajax is an aristocrat who must win over the citizen body. But whereas plaintiffs and defendants in the Attic orators express their trust in the wisdom and competence of the jury and attempt to mollify them, Ajax goes out of his way to alienate his judges.<sup>71</sup> He denies their knowledge of the facts and therefore their competence to judge him. While first-hand knowledge of the facts at issue is desirable for any jury, it is usually unattainable, and is not generally taken to vitiate their judgement.<sup>72</sup> Ajax is being insulting and unreasonable. For in fact his fellow soldiers have more experience of him than most

<sup>70</sup> This position is argued at Plato, *Euthyd.* 283c–286d, and is attributed to Antisthenes by Aristotle (*Met.* 1024b32; *Top.* 104b21). It is also associated with Protagoras and Prodikos (Kerferd 1981a: 88–90).

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Lysias, 3.2, where the speaker declares that he would be terrified if he were speaking in front of any other court, but hopes to attain justice from the current jury.

<sup>72</sup> In his insistence on knowledge rather than speculation, and in his dismissal even of his fellow kings as judges due to their incompetence, Ajax may show Socratic or Platonic influence. The incapacity of the average Athenian to achieve political expertise is a common motif in the *Republic* and *Statesman*. On the jury, compare *Tht.* 200d–201c, together with the remarks of Burnyeat 1990: 124–7, 165. Frag. 196 (Decleva Caizzi) reports that Antisthenes criticised the Athenians for electing people into the generalship whether or not they were qualified (cf. Rankin 1986: 155).

and they *are* in authority over him in this instance. Denial of this authority by Ajax, or by a member of the Athenian elite for that matter, will be received with displeasure.<sup>73</sup> We will see in Gorgias' *Defence of Palamedes* that the difficulty of arriving at a true judgement and communicating it can be expressed in terms far less offensive. For Gorgias and Palamedes the difficulty is epistemological, but it is emphasised in order to urge caution in judgement, not to disqualify the judges.

Ajax, then, is an example of the capital which could be made from free invention within a mythological context. For a 'sophist' like Antisthenes with interests in rhetoric and ethics, Ajax offered the opportunity to formulate problems in the ethical utility of speech and to try to modernise the Homeric hero.<sup>74</sup> What better way to dramatise the importance of speech and self-presentation in fifth-century Athens than to place a hero who was devoid of rhetorical capacity and political sensitivity in a forensic situation?<sup>75</sup> The choice of Ajax showed that some heroes could not be modernised; the epic hero cannot cope in contemporary Athens. He is banging his head against a rhetorical democratic wall. Thus Antisthenes is taking advantage of the ironic possibilities of a mythical framework for his teaching, and he is careful to underscore the irony whenever possible. Both Gorgias' *Defence of Palamedes* and Hippias' *Trojan Dialogue* display the same ironic interaction between the content of speech and a mythical context which undercuts that content.<sup>76</sup>

The speech of Odysseus relies, predictably, on the premise that the end justifies the means.<sup>77</sup> The objective of the campaign is the conquest of Troy, and if this involves base disguises and a degree of cunning, then disguises and cunning are justified. Ajax's distrust of speech and of the judges is represented as a threat, and Ajax himself is accused of stupidity and envy. Odysseus' declaration that he wants to help the cause even if nobody praises him may preview Cynic views on obscurity (ἄδοξία), where the absence of glory and the appearance of abjectness are better

<sup>73</sup> In some versions of the story, the jury was made up of Trojan captives. Yet Antisthenes' attitude towards the Greek leaders does not encourage us to believe that he would be any more respectful of Greek soldiers. The speech of Odysseus interprets Ajax's remarks on the jury as a threat (5).

<sup>74</sup> Antisthenes thus approaches closely the practice of the tragedians.

<sup>75</sup> Plato neatly inverts the moral significance of this situation in the *Apology*. Sokrates' defence speech marks the *demythologising* of sophistic ethical paradigms. We need no Ajax or Herakles when we have Sokrates.

<sup>76</sup> Compare the dramatic irony of Bacch. 5.162–75, where Meleager's recommendation of Deianeira as a bride for Herakles never fails to raise a shudder and motivates the following break-off. In the sophistic examples here, however, the situational irony undercuts the intellectual and moral content of what is being said.

<sup>77</sup> Compare the words of Odysseus in *Soph. Phil.* 108–11.

indications of excellence than glory and ambition.<sup>78</sup> He plays unknowingly both on Ajax's fate (when he predicts that Ajax may fall on some obstacle) and on his own future monumentalisation in epic, for he labels himself with the Homeric epithets of 'much-enduring', 'full of resources', and 'crafty'.<sup>79</sup> Odysseus does not dwell on the problem of speech, integrated as he is into late fifth-century rhetorical culture. Nor would it be to his advantage to discuss the art in which he excels. Instead, he concentrates on the ethical problems implied by Ajax's world view, showing himself to be the kind of (enlightened?) pragmatist that would be familiar to Antisthenes' audience.

This pair of speeches thus confronts two mythical characters in a forensic situation taken from contemporary Athens. One hero can conform and one cannot.<sup>80</sup> The speeches are examples of successful and unsuccessful oratory, and illustrate the sophistic practice of embodying rhetorical principles in the discourse of mythical characters. Antisthenes could best achieve his effect by using a mythological framework. Because Ajax and Odysseus are familiar from epic, lyric, and countless tragedies, his message can be hammered home by irony. The mythical past and the present were always juxtaposed in Greek consciousness; by adjusting the voice of the past to speak to the concerns of the present Antisthenes renders the juxtaposition more meaningful. He also problematises the setting up of mythological characters as paradigms. Ajax's failure to believe in the power or utility of speech encapsulates the incongruity between the mythological past and the world of the present. Only the more adaptable Odysseus may be the ancestor of sophistic and Athenian versatility. Yet the expression of Ajax's failure acts as a paradigm for future success. If we learn the lesson the speech teaches, we may do better. The debate between Ajax and Odysseus advertises both the efficacy and the fallibility of language. Ajax is impolitic and unrealistic, but nagging questions about the relevance of a knowledge of the facts of a case remain. We will now extend our examination of this tension to the *epideixeis* of Gorgias.

### The Defence of Palamedes

Gorgias' *Defence of Palamedes* is a speech purportedly delivered to the Greeks at Troy by Palamedes when charged with treachery through the

<sup>78</sup> Stanford 1954: 98; Rankin 1986: 169. <sup>79</sup> Rankin 1986: 166, 171.

<sup>80</sup> Ajax, of course, did not succeed even when he was judged on purely epic and heroic terms, but what is important in Antisthenes' portrayal is the programmatic insistence on the importance of speech (Ajax fails as an orator), and the implicit dismissal of aristocratic ethics (Ajax fails as a hero).



connivance of Odysseus (DK 82B11a). It attempts to demonstrate the truth (Palamedes' innocence: a mythological given) by strict logic. Palamedes undertakes to prove that he had neither motive, means, nor opportunity to commit the crime, and he does this by setting up the standard of what a rational man would do in any given situation.<sup>81</sup> Both this speech and the *Encomium of Helen* 'proceed by drawing *a priori* distinctions and combine them with appeals to psychological verisimilitude'.<sup>82</sup> Palamedes' speech embodies the same concern with possibilities of speech as did the Antisthenic speech of Ajax, but rather than dismissing the importance of speech, Palamedes recognises its problematic necessity. The charge against him is unfounded, and he is therefore at a loss for words *unless* he can learn from the truth itself how to defend himself (4). He must somehow transfer his consciousness of the truth to the jury. Moreover, he knows that his accuser is ignorant of the facts: 'nor do I know how someone could know something which did not take place' (5).

Palamedes brings up two problems dear to sophistic hearts. How can one transfer knowledge of something from one person to another through speech, and how can one say what is not? The first problem concerns the possibility of communication, and we know that it fascinated Gorgias. In his treatise *On What Is Not Or On Nature* (DK 82B3) he attempted to prove that nothing exists, that if anything did exist man could not apprehend it, and that even if it could be apprehended it could not be communicated to anyone else. In supporting these theses, Gorgias also touches on the second, epistemological problem: what is not does not exist. If it did exist it would both be and not be, since to the extent that it is thought of as not being, it will not be, but to the extent that it *is* what is not, it will be (67). This leads to absurdity. This problem is related to the argument for the impossibility of contradiction referred to above: if someone says what is not so, his speech is empty of reference and he is not talking at all. But Odysseus has spoken; there is therefore a danger that his speech will be taken to have a reference. By saying and thinking something, he creates it. One can speak something without knowing it. Palamedes' question, 'how can someone know as "being," something that is not?' is a reasonable one, but he runs up against the power of speech to confer reality.

Just as Palamedes is stupefied by Odysseus' ability to say what is not,

<sup>81</sup> For a detailed analysis of the technique of argumentation in this speech, see Long 1984: 233–41; Cosenza 1983.

<sup>82</sup> De Romilly [1988]/1992: 61.

he is concerned about his own ability to communicate what is. It is a good thing that he has not read *On What is Not Or On Being*, for his doubts would then be reinforced: 'It is *logos* by which we indicate things, but *logos* is not substances and real things. We don't, then, indicate to those near us things that are, but *logos*' (84). These epistemological problems set the speeches of Palamedes and Odysseus on an equal footing, and do not encourage optimism about the outcome of the case. Nor does the mythological context of the speech cheer us; even Palamedes feels disheartened. As he concludes his defence, he pleads: 'If it were possible for the truth of deeds to become clear and evident to listeners through words, judgement would now be easy on the basis of what has been spoken, but since this is not so, keep my body safe and wait a while, and make your judgement with truth' (35). After constructing an exhaustive argument, he retreats and appeals to the judges to wait until they can judge truly. It is unclear, however, by what criterion they are supposed to judge. *Logos* seems incapable of revealing the truth. Palamedes dramatises the tension between the rationalist belief that all problems are subject to logical analysis and resolution and the sceptical position (by now familiar to us) that words are not an adequate vehicle for reality. Only when one ignores this tension can the argumentation of Palamedes' speech serve, as is sometimes held, as an example of correct rhetoric and positive rationality in action. The defence is far from a textbook rhetorical exercise designed to be copied blindly and emulated as a model. There is every reason not to conclude that Gorgias' work has an entirely positive thrust.<sup>83</sup>

The mythological context of the speech justifies this reserve. One can hardly argue that the speech represents the triumph of reason and oratory when one recalls that Palamedes' attempt at defence was a failure; Odysseus won the day and Palamedes was unjustly executed. In the sophistic period and later Palamedes was a famed example of judicial murder.<sup>84</sup> Palamedes would like to imagine that he, his judges, and his colleagues act upon rational principles, but he fails to take into account the extent of Odysseus' malice and the possibility of forged evidence. In his assessment of Odysseus' motives, he states the possibilities in a remarkably even-handed manner. If Odysseus knows or imag-

<sup>83</sup> Segal 1962: 119 argues that the *Palamedes* marks an advance in Gorgianic thinking from the *Helen* in which earlier excitement over the irrational motivation of the psyche is gone, replaced by a conception of the psyche as a rational organism. Yet this ignores the ironic implications of the speech and the mythological context of Palamedes' failure.

<sup>84</sup> *RE* 18.2, 2503.

ines him guilty, his prosecution makes him the best of men, but if he has prosecuted out of jealousy or villainy, he is the worst of men (3). Palamedes does not choose one option over the other, however, and his entire defence is based upon the premise that Odysseus accused him 'thinking that these things are so' (5). When he addresses Odysseus directly he does imply that he is a worthless man, but again attempts to confute him by logical argument. (Either Odysseus knows or he imagines. He does not know, and he would be foolish to trust to conjecture when not knowing the truth.) Finally he declares that he does not wish to accuse Odysseus in return of all his many crimes; he wishes to be acquitted not on the basis of Odysseus' evil deeds, but on the basis of his own good deeds (27). He is not, then, ignorant of Odysseus' duplicity, but hopes to rise above it and have the facts speak for themselves. But this is precisely what they cannot do.

Palamedes seems unaware of the (traditional) existence of an incriminating letter from Priam and gold buried in his tent by Odysseus. This adds a further layer of irony: when he challenges his opposition to produce evidence of his treason (22), he is doomed to failure. Ignoring Odysseus' irrational malice will lead to the overthrow of his carefully elaborated world of logic. Odysseus' evidence, moreover, will be not witnesses, but inanimate objects, incapable of speech or reason and at the mercy of the one who produces them. Gorgias, then, has constructed the speech to be instructive on two levels: it teaches its audience how to make a series of logically valid arguments based on likelihood (εἰκός), and it warns of the dangers of ignoring the irrational element of the human soul. The undermining power of the mythological context repeats therefore on the level of plot the difficulty Palamedes identifies in the realm of speech. As in the speeches of Ajax and Odysseus, the audience's superior knowledge creates dramatic irony and reinforces Gorgias' point. Those who carelessly read the speech as an 'Art of Rhetoric' will profit but be blind to its deeper meaning. The alert audience will learn a lesson about the limits of logic and speech.

### The Encomium of Helen

The *Encomium of Helen* (DK 82B11) returns to questions of language with even greater explicitness. The task of analysing Gorgias' psychology (or 'psychagogy') in the speech has been well performed by others; I will concentrate here on the passages which are significant for an understanding of Gorgias' attitude to myth and its relationship to the power of

speech.<sup>85</sup> The aim of Gorgias' speech is to praise Helen and to free her from ill repute (DK 82B11.2). He proves that she was innocent of wrongdoing when she ran away with Paris to Troy. If she was compelled to do it by Fate and the gods, she was an innocent victim of compulsion (6). If she was forced by violence then she was again innocent (7). If persuaded by speech, she was innocent, since speech has a magical and incantatory power which is a form of necessity (8-14). Lastly, she was innocent if she acted under the influence of love, since love is either an irresistible divine power or a disease, in which case it is a misfortune, not a sin (15-19). Gorgias ends the speech in self-congratulation: he has freed Helen from unjust blame and from ignorance, written a praise of Helen and a plaything for himself (21).

It has been observed that the *Encomium of Helen* is more an encomium of *logos* than of Helen. The mythical framework of the work is consciously literary and artificial: 'its setting is from the first the literary, poetic tradition',<sup>86</sup> and is a tool for comment on Gorgias' medium. Gorgias begins his self-placement in the speech by appropriating the values of the encomiastic tradition. Truth, he says, is becoming to speech (κόσμος . . . λόγῳ . . . ἀλήθεια, 1); we should praise and blame appropriately. What does it mean that truth is regarded as κόσμος ('order', 'ornament', 'credit') for speech? That the relationship of truth with speech is one of order (there is a fitness in truthful speech), of credit (truth morally validates speech), and of ornamentation (truth is an attractive decoration for speech). 'Truth' is not itself a governing principle of speech, but a subordinate aspect. It is appropriate because its nature is to be rhetorically effective. The concept of κόσμος bridges the ethical and the aesthetic, but the latter realm dominates, for speech can convince and bewitch even if it is false, as long as it is beautiful.<sup>87</sup> Because of the flexibility of Greek syntax, the words 'truth is a κόσμος for speech' could be inverted and a new meaning extracted: 'order [that is, the rational deployment of argument] is truth for a speech'. The remainder of the speech shows that truth for Gorgias is not so much a problem of ethics as of epistemology, something to be extracted from a rigorous consideration of the power of *logos*. *Logos* determines truth, or better, Gorgias operates with two notions of truth, one factual and one subjective. The difficulty of establishing the former leads to emphasis on the latter as criterion.

The beginning sections of the speech remind us of the inexorable chain of logic in the speech of Palamedes. Gorgias supplies a criterion to

<sup>85</sup> Segal 1962; de Romilly 1973; Rosenmeyer 1955. <sup>86</sup> Segal 1962: 102, 119-20.

<sup>87</sup> Compare section 13: 'written with skill but not spoken with truth'.

help judgement in the form of the calculation (λογισμὸν) that he injects into his speech. The writer can use only his own resources to get at the truth, which he does by analysing his own medium.<sup>88</sup> This self-analysis enables him to reissue the truth. To be sure, it is *his* truth, but the relative inaccessibility of knowledge means that a personal truth is acceptable. Precisely because the truth is reissued with reference to the medium, it stands a better chance of being valid. The power of speech can overcome human ignorance; it is all a matter of logic. So far, so good. There is a problem, however. We saw above how Palamedes retreated from his optimistic claims for the power of rational argumentation towards the end of his defence. There is a related movement in the *Encomium of Helen* as Gorgias passes from consideration of the possible roles of fate and of violence to an examination of the power of speech and love. In sections 8-14, Gorgias' argument explains how *logos* can act as a magical incantation and a drug upon the soul of the audience. Speech becomes a mighty lord (8) that acts with the force of necessity. Gorgias modulates his focus on positivistic truth to an acknowledgement of the power of conjecture, and in so doing, his account becomes self-referential. Unlike Palamedes, his logic takes the irrational into account.

The irrational works on *doxa*, opinion. We learn elsewhere that Gorgias held that 'being is obscure when it does not meet with seeming, and seeming is weak when it does not meet with being' (DK 82B26). This is reflected in section 3 of the *Encomium*: Zeus 'seemed to be her father because he was' and Tyndareus was disproved 'because he was said to be' or 'because he said he was' (διὰ τὸ εἶναι ἔδοξεν, ὁ δὲ διὰ τὸ φάναι ἡλέγχθη). The antithesis is precious but meaningful. The fact that Zeus was genuinely Helen's father made it easier for *doxa* to be convinced of it (being is obscure if it does not coincide with seeming), whereas Tyndareus' claims rested on speech alone (seeming is weak if it does not coincide with being). Speech itself is not enough, but must rest on something else, and the problem is, on what? Even if it rests on being it is not assured of success, for being and seeming, truth and opinion, are interdependent. The problem is dealt with fully in section 11. Those who persuade do so by means of a false *logos*:

As many people as have persuaded or do now persuade others (however many) about any one of a variety of possible topics, do so by moulding a false *logos*. For if we all had a memory of all past events, and a consciousness of present events,

<sup>88</sup> De Romilly 1973: 158, also sees Pindar's authority as a model for Gorgias and remarks perceptively that the divine power of speech has shifted from the Muse to the author. As the power of the poet becomes more highly rated, so that of the Muse declines.

and a foreknowledge of future events, *logos* would not similarly be like those, for whom, as it is,<sup>89</sup> it is not easy either to remember the past, examine the present or divine the future. The result is that on most topics most people employ conjecture (*doxa*) as a counsellor for their soul.

We should note that these statements are not absolute: the problem is the lack of universal knowledge and the difficulty, not the impossibility, of attaining it. Gorgias does not deny the existence of truth, but finds it relatively inaccessible. Indeed, rhetorical art can obscure the truth, as he tells us when he speaks of public debates in which an artful speech persuades although it is not 'written with truth' (13). Our relative lack of knowledge produces a *logos* that is similar to our intellectual state. It is a conjectural *logos* because we rely on conjecture, and conjecture is swayed by irrational forces like love.

Gorgias' emphasis on *doxa* and the uncertainty of knowledge reminds us of how Xenophanes combined a version of scepticism ('seeming/conjecture [*dokos*] has been wrought over all things' DK 21B34) with a rejection of the claims of poetic inspiration. Gorgias too rejects the possibility of a privileged source of knowledge. His declaration at the beginning of the piece that Helen has been universally blamed by the unanimous conviction of the poets who have heard (2) dismisses the role of inspiration and implies that poets rely on hearsay.<sup>90</sup> The lines from section 11 quoted above recall the claim of the Hesiodic Muses to know what is, what will be, and what was (*Theog.* 38). Gorgias denies this knowledge to the poets, although his reference to persuasion by a false *logos* surely descends from the Muses' ability to make false things like genuine ones (*Theog.* 27-8). What, then, do we substitute for inspiration? The rational deployment of *logos*, that is λογισμός (calculation; cf. section 2: 'giving calculation to my *logos*'). This calculation is double-edged, however. It is both the process by which people arrive at knowledge, and the careful structure of persuasion by which they convince others. Why is *logos* defined as false when it operates persuasively? Because the *logos* is not the same for all people. We must use *doxa* to persuade because it is the operative principle of human existence (like the *doxa* of Parmenides, the second best option used because mankind is confused). *Logos* is false because it must be subjective.

The *epideixis*, then, begins with an encomiastic vision of the truth

<sup>89</sup> My translation here adopts Diel's conjecture οἷς τὰ νῦν γέ. For discussion of the crux, see MacDowell 1982: 38.

<sup>90</sup> Kennedy (in Sprague 1972: 50) translates 'the testimony of inspired poets', but the Muse is notably absent from Gorgias' treatment.

activated by the powerful rigours of logic. This is modified in order to stress the deceptive powers of speech, and the discourse grows increasingly self-referential. Persuasion results from the orderly arrangement of words in arguments, but it acts upon a soul that rarely has the means to acquire knowledge and achieves its effects through this deficiency. The myth of Helen was well suited to bring out this tension, especially in the version Gorgias uses. The guilt or innocence of Helen had long been a *cause célèbre*. It is significant that Gorgias conducts his argument on the level of interpretation of action, not on the level of action itself.<sup>91</sup> This was a deliberate choice, for there was an ancient tradition, reflected in Stesikhoros' *Palinode*, that excused Helen by denying her physical presence in Troy. To accept her presence in Troy and argue her innocence was radical, and ideal for demonstrating the power of speech. Yet the more successfully Gorgias argues that the magical power of speech compelled Helen to do what she should not have done, the less effective is his speech, for we become aware that he is exercising that same persuasion on us, to induce us to believe what we should not. By choosing the Helen who went to Troy, Gorgias determines a defence set up to undermine itself.<sup>92</sup>

Inside the myth, speech is glorified through its magical power over Helen; in the world of the *epideixis*, it is glorified by being employed in an improbable defence. The paradox disturbs the reader. Is the defence successful? If one accepts a 'subjective' version of truth, it is, but one still wonders about the relevance of the 'factual' truth. Gorgias reissues the truth successfully from a rhetorical and logical point of view. He takes into account the irrational, using it both as an argument and a technique. Yet there is something wrong, and we are meant to feel it. This discomfort arises directly from the implicit characterisation of Gorgias' own speech as deceptive and is confirmed in the conclusion: 'I wished to write a discourse that was an encomium of Helen and a plaything (παίγνιον) for myself' (21). In the same conclusion he declares he has abided by the aims he set down at the beginning of his speech and returns to the themes of justice and ignorance. He has removed unjust blame and ignorant conjecture, but this last collocation strikes us as somewhat oxymoronic; the *doxa*, after all, is inescapably ignorant. Does he claim to make it knowledgeable? Gorgias' comment that his work is a 'plaything' reflects a subjective stance. What is an encomium for one person is a toy for another. The conclusion undermines the whole, but

<sup>91</sup> Untersteiner [1949]/1954: 120.      <sup>92</sup> Cf. Wardy 1996: ch. 2.

this is inevitable due to the relative inaccessibility of knowledge and the consequent rule of the subjective. Speech fails even as it is most successful. Yet it is when we realise that discourse is a toy that we have the best chance of using it to our advantage. In manipulating Helen, Gorgias displays his own particular subtlety in his relationship with tradition. He both does and does not confront it, turning from external act to internal motivation. Myth can be used for the most serious intellectual revelation and for the most frivolous diversion.

Discussing the role of the subjective in Gorgias' thought leads us back to Parmenides. It has long been realised that Gorgias' treatise on 'what is not' is a direct confrontation with the Eleatic philosophical tradition rooted in Parmenides.<sup>93</sup> We have seen how the epistemological difficulties of communication that he examines in this work are reflected in the *epideixeis* on Helen and Palamedes. It also seems likely that 'Gorgias . . . borrowed the idea of ἀπάτη [deception] as the basis of speech, both in oratory and in poetry, from Parmenides' whose 'deceptive ordering of words' (κόσμον ἀπατηλόν, DK 28B8.52) warns the reader not to surrender to the surface meaning of the *Doxa*.<sup>94</sup> Both Gorgias and Parmenides announce that speech is deceptive, but the announcement helps both to highlight and defuse the implusive potential of the confrontation between subjective and objective truth. Part of the solution for Gorgias lies in rational calculation. This leads to an understanding of irrational human motivation and teaches us how to apply the irrational in our attempts to convince others. Any attempt which does not take the irrational into account will fail. Yet this also means that any effort to reach 'truth' is coloured by the irrational. Rationality and its opposite are inextricably linked. Truth is always subjective. Gorgias' assertion that his account is true does not, therefore, contradict his recognition of the deceptive nature of speech; the paradox is a direct result of the subjectivity of speech and thought. The objective truth ('what is') may exist, and we may, laudably, attempt to reach it with logic and then put it into words, but *On What Is Not Or On Nature* points out the problematic nature of each of these steps.<sup>95</sup> The internal movement of the *Encomium of Helen* mirrors the process by which we try to pass from a mental conception of objective truth to its expression. Our personal conception

<sup>93</sup> Guthrie 1969: 192–9; Kerferd 1981a: 93–9; Cassin 1983; Wardy 1996: 9–24.

<sup>94</sup> Verdenius 1981: 124–5.

<sup>95</sup> Montano 1983: 120–5 remarks how the work creates an uncrossable divide between logical and empirical levels, and points out the similarity with the mythological works, where no sensible proof or disproof of guilt or innocence is provided. Logical truth substitutes for factual truth.



of objective truth will itself be subjective, and when we attempt to communicate it to others, the very nature of language increases the subjective element exponentially.

Gorgias' analysis of the problem of language stands directly in the Parmenidean tradition. His conception of 'calculation' (λογισμός) is analogous to Parmenides' correct path of enquiry. Both acknowledge that the ordering power of the human mind can confer reality where none existed before and where it should not exist. The mortals of Parmenides' *Doxa* combine 'what is' and 'what is not' to create a world of seeming that cuts them off from the truth. Gorgias and his audience wander in a similar world of seeming and irrationality without easy access to the truth. Both thinkers produce paradoxical conclusions: Parmenides argues himself out of existence and Gorgias exposes and thus undermines the structure of his persuasive power. Both gain from the paradox, however. By calling attention to a gap between language and reality, they partially contain it and mould it to their purposes.<sup>96</sup> And here we can see an echo of Stesikhoros' Helen. In his version, the heroine never went to Troy, but was replaced by an image (εἶδωλον). The 'image' is an contentless imitation of reality; when people refer to it as 'Helen' the reference is empty. She is impossible to apprehend, and yet thousands died for her sake. If this figure is background to Gorgias' encomium, she is a perfect sign for the gap between language, appearance, and reality, a fugitive truth that dissolves into thin air when one tries to grasp it. The mythological Helen is doubly unreal, both as an artefact of the mythological tradition, subject to varied interpretation, and as a character that has a secondary existence as a shadow of itself.<sup>97</sup> What better figure to use as an embodiment of a theory about the subjective nature of reality? She is the perfect intellectual toy.

By manipulating the mythological tradition (conceived as a literary artefact) Gorgias makes an argument for his own primacy in the field of language and interpretation of reality. Whereas Parmenides created a clash between the mythological language which was the frame for his work, and the conclusions he reached, Gorgias creates a clash between his conclusions about speech and the particular conclusion he wishes us to reach about a mythological character – but the clash has wider

<sup>96</sup> Porter 1993: 289–90 argues that Gorgias' self-subversion is even more radical than I have been suggesting: 'By problematizing the relation of language and reality, Gorgias problematizes *each* of the two terms.'

<sup>97</sup> For a more complex reading of Gorgias' *epideixis* as 'the functional equivalent of Stesichorus's phantom', see Porter 1993: 278–80.

implications. Epistemological concerns exist side by side with self-advertisement and rhetorical posturing; the former makes the latter possible. Similarly with Prodikos and Hippias the presentation of ethical concerns was combined with an implicit recommendation that the sophist was the one who could pass on the intellectual skills necessary to formulate and manipulate the questions raised.

There is more, then, to the sophistic deployment of mythological incongruity than the mannered cultivation of paradox. 'Rational' and logical argumentation is displayed in a mythological framework that problematises the achievements of rationality. *Logos* is undermined by *mythos*. Let me stress that I do not argue that the discourse of myth is irrational, but that the tradition to which the sophists were heirs so figured it. When Gorgias or Antisthenes wants to emphasise the role of *doxa*, he does so through myth. When Gorgias hints at the subordination of truth to rhetorical device, he does so through myth. After all, the rhetorical conception of truth was just what the early philosophers condemned in the poets. Gorgias, both poet and philosopher, gives this conception epistemological grounding. The binary opposition between myth and philosophy breaks down.

This breakdown returns us to the discussion of deconstruction at the end of Chapter 2. In distinguishing Greek 'philosophical' from modern deconstructive analysis, I stressed that neither the text nor the author of the text is blind to its contradictions. We can see this with particular clarity in the case of Gorgias. Philosophical discourse has a tendency to totalise, privilege clarity, and attempt to control the uncontrollable. Gorgias, like a deconstructionist, realises that logic and rationality cannot function without their opposites, and demonstrates this in his mythological *epideixeis*. His analysis of rhetoric, both implicit and explicit, attempts to stake out that middle ground between meaning and non-meaning, 'is' and 'is not'. The rule of *doxa* reflects that the human condition is situated inevitably between these two extremes. Unlike a deconstructionist, however, Gorgias does believe in a remote (although perhaps inaccessible) truth. He admits that our linguistic control is never complete, but this admission defuses the potential of the problem. Myth is the vehicle for this admission and subsequent defusion because it is a discourse with a past. Also because mythological characters are images, shadows, of real people and are themselves endowed with reality only by the assertion of a rhetorical truth. Gorgias creates their incongruity to signal a larger incoherence in the functioning of language. The deconstructionist 'play of signifiers' finds its analogue in Gorgias' rhetorical

'plaything' that constructs and deconstructs truth while unmasking itself. When we move on to Plato, we shall find a similar concern with the unmasking of the rhetorical strategies, but coupled with a programme for moving towards the almost inaccessible truth. He rejects the subjectivity and conventionality of sophistic discourse that perceived the play of signifiers to be the end of the search for knowledge and took advantage of this perception. While he concedes the instability of language, he insists that our thought be directed towards the transcendently stable. The difficulty of this project means that discussion is a form of serious play and often ends in helplessness, but the hope of success should sustain us. Platonic scepticism, unlike its sophistic counterpart, is not an end in itself and a tool for manipulation.

#### CONCLUSION

This chapter has indicated that the attitude to myth in professional thinkers of the late fifth century was by no means homogeneous. The manipulation of myth ranged from Homeric interpretation which saw myth through the lens of a poetic text, to creative variations on traditional mythological material, to the demythologising of the tradition and rationalist theorising on the origins of society. The purpose of these strategies extended from intellectual exercise to self-display to meditations on the efficacy of rhetoric. Myth is accepted as a conventional tool and the sophists do not concern themselves with its truth value (except, that is, when Prodikos is specifically concerned with the truth value of conventional religion). Parallel to this lack of concern with truth and a view of myth as a literary phenomenon is the breaking-up of the tradition into a series of isolated tableaux. Just as the written tradition may be mined for *gnomai*, so the mythological storehouse may be raided for attractive situations. The textualisation of myth renders it a form of convention, and it is employed by the sophists as such.

Empedokles, we saw, was willing to use conventional language to make his point, and he was purportedly held in awe by his contemporaries for his spiritual and intellectual, even magical, powers (DK 31B112). Gorgias was supposed to have been his pupil (DK 31A1) and just as magically impressive. The nature and role of 'convention' is a primary area of concern for these thinkers. This is why their use of myth should not be dismissed as merely conventional; for some of them, language itself was 'conventional'. Between the manipulation of myth and the manipulation of language there exists an especially close relationship. It

is not just that we must use language to manipulate myth, but that manipulating myth is a figure for manipulating language. We have seen this most obviously in the case of Gorgias, but it is present to a lesser extent, in Prodikos, Hippias, and Antisthenes. Analysis of mythological *epideixeis* most often assumes that the mythological framework of the piece is both separable and transparent. Its purpose is seen as entertainment, and does not, as Kennedy generously puts it, 'mitigate against the usefulness of the work . . . many of the arguments could be taken out'.<sup>98</sup> But no argument exists without a context, and the mythological situations featured in the speeches allow a context to be imported, not just to alleviate boredom, but because context is meaningful.<sup>99</sup> The incongruities between frame and content examined in these pages are evidence that the authors of these *epideixeis* were not blind to the complications posed by context, but were ironically aware of them. This is so even in the ethical displays of Prodikos and Hippias. In what political or personal situations does it make sense to express one's desire to be good or to choose the path of goodness? How do our prior or subsequent acts and expectations affect the moral choices we make? How do our deeds match our words and the ethical rhetoric with which we surround ourselves? The world betrays Palamedes' rhetoric. Neoptolemos may well betray his own. Herakles exists in a realm of rhetorical potentiality where he may both choose his rhetoric and then choose whether to live up to it. Language may be magical, but it does not always convince, and even if it does, it does not always shape the world.

<sup>98</sup> Kennedy 1963: 170.

<sup>99</sup> Contrast the tetralogies of Antiphon (cf. Kennedy 1963: 170). Here we are presented with opposing speeches for prosecution and defence, but they are totally without context and are indeed mere compendia of arguments. They do not, therefore, contain any of the richness and irony of their mythological counterparts, nor do they raise second-order questions about the efficacy of speech.

## CHAPTER 5

### *The Protagoras: Platonic myth in the making*

#### INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter we saw how viewing the mythological tradition as a text allowed the sophists to create ironising mythological *epideixeis*. These *epideixeis* demonstrated the manipulation of linguistic and social convention through the creation and undermining of rhetorical and ethical paradigms. I suggested that mythological role-playing enabled the sophists to enter into a close relationship with these paradigms. Hippias can play Nestor, Antisthenes can impersonate both Ajax and Odysseus. *Epideixeis* that concentrate on paradigms for correct ethical behaviour assimilate themselves to, and manipulate, the traditional and societally non-threatening genre of ‘advice to young men’. There was, however, an omission: Protagoras’ myth of the origins of civilisation as transmitted in Plato’s *Protagoras*. Because of the complexity of the issues involved, the *Protagoras* has been reserved for separate treatment. Interpretative problems abound. Are we to believe that the speech Plato puts into Protagoras’ mouth represents a Protagorean or a Platonic, myth? If Protagorean, how is it affected by being embedded in a Platonic context?

In the following pages I shall argue that the myth of the *Protagoras* is substantially Protagorean and accurately represents a sophistic use of myth with close ties to other sophistic epideictic practice. This demonstration will have two (unequal) parts, both indicative of the role of social and mythological convention. The first concerns the use of myth to disguise the unexamined nature of conventional belief in the prerequisites for a just society. Protagoras’ introduction to his myth suggests that *mythos* and *logos* are easily distinguishable – and interchangeable – styles of presentation. Careful analysis shows that the myth is a crucial underpinning for his arguments, couched as mythological narrative to disguise its lack of rigour. Plato demonstrates the impasse reached when

insufficient attention is paid to the status and types of arguments used to support a proposition. *Mythos* cannot pretend to be *logos*. The second part shows how Plato broadens the implications of Protagorean myth. Protagoras is insensible of the ethical thrust of his mythological exempla, and the dialogue thus critiques the sophist's thoughtlessness and suggests the superiority of Plato's mythological manipulation.

As we shall see in this and other chapters, one of Plato's mythological interests is the comparison of an investigator with mythological characters. In this he is the inheritor, but also the critic, of sophistic traditions. The sophists claimed to be purveyors of socially generic 'advice to young men'. In Hippias' *Trojan Dialogue*, Neoptolemos asks Nestor what pursuits he should follow to gain a good reputation. The advice given is equivalent to Hippias' own advice. The situation at the beginning of the *Protagoras* is identical. Sokrates' young friend Hippokrates wants to be renowned (316c1) in the city and thinks that Protagoras can make him so. Protagoras agrees (319a1–2). Both sophists convey conventional wisdom and the means to take advantage of it. In the *Protagoras* this knowledge is characterised as 'Promethean' forethought. One overriding question in the dialogue, however, is whether Sokrates or Protagoras can most correctly be regarded as exercising this 'Promethean' virtue. In fact, I contend, many of the earlier Platonic dialogues are intended as replacements for sophistic *epideixeis* like the *Choice of Herakles* and the *Trojan Dialogue*. This helps to explain the protreptic nature and ethical stress of the early dialogues. Instead of the manipulation of commonplaces, however, we get Socratic dialogue. Plato wants the young taught thought, not rhetorical and ethical conventions. Instead of hiding behind Nestor or Odysseus, Sokrates speaks in his own voice, but in so doing he becomes assimilated to and rewrites the heroes of the past. Sokrates is a philosophical Herakles along Antisthenean lines.

The relationship between early Socratic dialogue and sophistic *epideixis* is made clear in the *Laches*. Two fathers concerned about the education of their sons ask Nikias and Laches what lessons or practices (ἐπιτηδεύσαντες) would make their sons best (ἄριστοι) (179d7). The vocabulary of search for the appropriate educational practice is repeated several times (180a3–5, c2–4, 181c8), and is strongly reminiscent of that used in the *Trojan Dialogue* (*Hippias Major* 286b1–2: 'what pursuits (ἐπιτηδεύματα) a young man might practise (ἐπιτηδεύσας) in order to gain the best reputation (εὐδοκιμώτατος)'). They take the question to Sokrates, but he refuses to give conventional answers, and most of the dialogue is taken up with a discussion of the nature of courage. They

expect an *epideixis*, but Sokrates disdains long speeches and engages in dialectic. We see, then, that Socratic concerns with education could be grouped together with their sophistic counterparts, but unlike the sophists, Sokrates undermines rather than transmits commonplaces. This is not the whole story. Sokrates undermines in order to build more stable definitions, while the sophists transmit *topoi* so that their pupils can take advantage of them. The sophists are more subversive, but this did not stop the Athenians from blaming Sokrates for sophistic faults. The *Protagoras* illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of the sophistic approach, while putting in place a Platonic framework to supersede it. It is, therefore, a valuable introduction to the practice of Platonic myth.

#### PROTAGORAS' 'GREAT SPEECH'

I shall begin by presenting a neutral summary of Protagoras' 'Great Speech', indicating its intellectual background. The *Protagoras* examines the question of whether political excellence can be taught. Sokrates asks the sophist what he teaches. Protagoras replies that he teaches good counsel in personal and civic affairs, and this is described by Sokrates as the political art.<sup>1</sup> Sokrates doubts, however, that this can be taught. He cites two items of evidence: when there is discussion in the Athenian assembly on technical matters the citizens accept the advice of those they consider experts and dismiss the non-expert. On matters of state policy, however, they accept the advice of all. Furthermore, even those who are outstanding for their political wisdom are unable to hand on what they know to the young. Clearly, then, the Athenians do not believe that political expertise can be taught (319a8–320c1). In order to vindicate his profession as a teacher of political excellence, Protagoras must refute Sokrates while taking into account his evidence. He offers to do this either through a *mythos* or through a *logos* (320c2–4), and when given a free hand, chooses myth as more charming (320c6–7). The speech that follows consists of a myth and subsequent discussion.

The myth concerns the origins of society. After the gods had created mortal creatures, the gods assigned Prometheus and Epimetheus to give them their faculties. It was agreed that Epimetheus would distribute and that Prometheus would inspect the outcome. Epimetheus gave all creatures the powers they needed to survive, but left man until last, and there

<sup>1</sup> At 319a4, Sokrates uses the term *politike technē*, and this usage is accepted by Protagoras (Stokes 1986: 200–1). By 323a, *politike aretē* and *politike technē* seem interchangeable (Stokes 1986: 233).

was nothing left over for him. Prometheus therefore stole the gifts of fire and technical skill from Athena and Hephaistos, but was unable to obtain political wisdom, since Zeus kept watch over that. Man developed religion, speech, and skills such as carpentry, but lived in scattered units which were unable to provide protection against beasts. When, however, people banded together to fight, they treated each other with injustice, scattered again, and were in danger of destruction. All this because they did not have political skill (πολιτικὴν τέχνην, 322b8). Zeus therefore sent Hermes to give shame (*aidos*) and justice (*dike*) to mankind; these qualities are equivalent to political skill. They were not to be distributed like the practical talents (where, for example, one doctor is sufficient for many people) but all were to share in them, for, says Zeus, 'cities would not come into existence if only a few people shared them, like the other arts' (322d3–4). Anyone who cannot share them is to be killed. Protagoras finishes his story here and remarks that the Athenians are therefore correct not to recognise political experts, since all men are expected to share in political excellence (πολιτικῆς ἀρετῆς, 323a1). He then moves on to a subsidiary proof (323a7): everybody claims to be just whether they are so or not, because society decrees that all should share in justice; otherwise cities would not exist.

He then argues, based on the practice of punishment, that nobody thinks political excellence is innate. There is no punishment for natural disabilities; punishment aims at correction, and since injustice is punished, it follows that justice can be instilled by correction and education. It can therefore be taught. At this point (324d2) Protagoras explicitly leaves *mythos* for *logos* in order to deal with the Sokrates' second point, why good men cannot teach their sons their own excellence. He counters that they do indeed have it taught: society does the teaching, through word and example, and, if these are not sufficient, through punishment. The reason that good men can have worthless sons is that the talent for political excellence varies. Even so, all are *relatively* expert in political excellence.

The late fifth century witnesses a proliferation of discussions on the origin of society. This issue is often linked with debates about the role of nature and convention in morality. The theory of a social contract identifies a primitive, often bestial condition, associates a principle of insecurity with it that makes civilisation desirable, and refers the legitimacy of government back to an agreement.<sup>2</sup> Although few fifth-century

<sup>2</sup> Kahn 1981: 93. For a survey of patterns of prehistory in later theorists, see Cole 1967: 25–46. At *Resp.* 358e–359c Glaukon refers to a widespread *logos* about the contractual origins of laws and justice.



testimonia speak of a contract, many talk of men 'establishing' laws or cities, and of the origin of laws in human persuasion. It is clear, therefore, that Protagoras was drawing on a developed tradition when he crafted his account. What is unclear is the extent of Protagoras' creative contribution.<sup>3</sup> It is uncertain whether the earlier accounts included mythological characters such as Prometheus, or whether they were pseudo-historical. The most one can say is that Protagoras' version was probably synthetic.

We have only Plato's word for it that the content of the speech represents a truly Protagorean account. Any proposed solution to this problem must reflect a critic's own favourable or unfavourable preconceptions of Platonic or Protagorean philosophy, and modern critics differ profoundly. It seems likely that Plato would have an interest in a reasonably accurate report of Protagorean practice so that he could make his own critique more devastating. This certainly seems to be his practice in the *Theaetetus*, where Sokrates is made to go to great lengths to do justice to Protagorean relativism; only when the best case has been made can a refutation be convincing (*Tht.* 152–71, especially 166–7). Generally speaking, then, I incline to the position that Plato is substantially reproducing Protagoras' own views.<sup>4</sup> Protagoras did indeed use a currently popular myth about the origins of society and Plato, knowing this, felt it was no misrepresentation to put the myth in his mouth with the adaptations he thought literarily necessary. We do know that Protagoras wrote a work *On the State of Things in the Beginning* (DK 80A1) which could have served as a source for the Platonic treatment, but again the extent of the borrowing is unclear.<sup>5</sup> External evidence cannot solve this problem, but the nature of Protagoras' educational project implies something close to the version of the myth we find in Plato.

<sup>3</sup> See Kahn 1981: 103–4 for affinities of Protagoras' myth with the *Prometheus Bound*, where the *technai* are described as the gifts of Prometheus. If the *Prometheus Bound* is by Aeschylus, it could be a source for Protagoras. Some, however, date the play in the 440s or 430s. On problems of dating and authenticity, see Griffith 1983: 31–4 and 1977: 9–13, 252–4.

<sup>4</sup> Guthrie 1969: 64 with n. 1 (and bibliography). For more general remarks on Plato's portrayal of Protagoras, see 265–6. See also Taylor 1976: 78; Schiappa 1991: 180–4 (the speeches Plato puts in Protagoras' mouth are not *ipsissima verba*, but probably are *ipsissima praecepta*). For Untersteiner [1949]/1954: 58 the myth is a synthesis of the philosophy of Protagoras. I cannot agree with Havelock's (1957: chapters 4, 7–8, and *passim*) contention that Plato's aim was to 'replace the [Protagorean] original by his own version and to destroy so far as possible the effect of the original by dramatising his own as though it were the original'. Havelock believes that the most mythological element in the speech (that is, a divine apparatus) is the least Protagorean (88, 91–4). Yet the codification of societal assumptions in mythological form is a common sophistic practice. He assumes that the original Protagorean account was purely anthropological, ignoring the methodological significance of the divine apparatus. The account of civilisation given in the myth is flawed and incomplete. It is not credible, therefore, that Plato wants to claim it as his own.

<sup>5</sup> See O'Sullivan 1996: 120–1 for arguments that the title is genuine.

In the description Protagoras gives of his training at 318de, he says his aim is to teach his pupils how to manage their own affairs and those of the city, and to make them a political force. Sokrates regards this as teaching them how to be good citizens, and Protagoras agrees.<sup>6</sup> The exchange suggests that Protagoras may not have bothered with a technical description of his programme, and this is confirmed by Hippokrates' confusion at the beginning of the dialogue. He first implies that Protagoras could make him 'wise' (310d) and later suggests that Protagoras' profession is to make one a 'clever speaker' (312d). The arenas for 'clever speaking' in the last part of the fifth century were the assembly and the law-courts. To desire to become a clever speaker is to announce political ambitions. Yet it was a peculiarity of Athenian rhetorical procedure that expertise had to be hidden by dissimulation; one could not risk seeming too clever, since this might seem non-democratic.<sup>7</sup> Hippokrates, then, is ashamed to say that he wants the skills that will enable him to manipulate the assembly; nor can Protagoras confess such an aim. This is why he allows Sokrates to gloss his teaching as the making of good citizens (based on an equivocation at 319a1: Protagoras wants to make his students 'most powerful [δυνατωτάτους] in speech and action', but we might also translate 'most capable' – far less threatening). Protagoras teaches management, but must be careful how he presents it. He must claim to teach, yet cannot be too specific. The dissimulation inherent in his announcement of his educational project is recapitulated in the myth, which encapsulates a social belief system ready to be absorbed by his pupils and turned to their advantage.<sup>8</sup> The same dissimulation was present in the *epideixeis* surveyed in the previous chapter. Protagoras adapts a currently available myth to suit his own special interests, namely, the teaching of political excellence in the context of Athenian democracy. His teleological view of previous poets, thinkers, and teachers all leading up to the figure of the sophist (*Prt.* 317b) indicates he favours a view of human development leading from primitive beginnings to the advanced educational opportunities available from himself as sophist.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Rutherford 1995: 128 catalogues the ambiguities of this exchange.

<sup>7</sup> Dover 1974: 25 f.; O'Sullivan 1992: 62 (with particular reference to written and unwritten style).

<sup>8</sup> Compare Goldberg's (1983: 52) hypothesis of an overt (democratic) *logos* and a covert (manipulative) Protagorean *logos*.

<sup>9</sup> The statement in the myth that man shares the divine portion (322a3) and has a kinship with god (322a4) has engendered suspicion in light of Protagoras' known agnosticism. Yet the myth as a whole is built around the activities of mythological figures and, as Kerferd 1981a: 168 remarks, 'the fact that it is a myth deprives it of any possible conflict with Protagoras' agnosticism'. See also Brisson 1975: 8–9, n. 3.

WHY *MYTHOS*? STRUCTURE AND ASSUMPTIONS

Why does Protagoras need precisely *this* version of the myth, or myth at all? It is easy to be misled by the introductory implication that either *mythos* or *logos* will do for a proof that political skill can be and is taught. Let us note, however, the way in which Protagoras sets up the alternatives (320c2–7). Sokrates sets the stage by confessing his puzzlement. Protagoras claims to be able to teach political skill, but Sokrates does not think this possible. Like the other Greeks, he thinks that the Athenians are ‘wise’, and their practice does not recognise political experts. The sophist should not begrudge them a demonstration of his point. We suspect irony here; Sokrates does not usually bow to democratic wisdom. Yet the request effectively sets Protagoras in a position of superiority, and Protagoras’ response amplifies this implication. He points out that he is older than his auditors and thus more authoritative: ‘Shall I, as an older man speaking to you younger ones, make my demonstration by speaking a *mythos*, or shall I go through in detail by means of *logos*?’ Clearly, one method of exposition (*mythos*) is more appropriate to the senior status that has been accorded him. The expansion of the first alternative makes it plain which Protagoras prefers. After this, the audience must defer to his wishes. By posing the question of audience preference as he does, Protagoras manipulates his listeners into allowing him his choice of approach, and makes it seem as though the two approaches are equivalent and easily distinguishable.<sup>10</sup> It will later become evident that the choice of myth is indispensable, but by allowing (and prejudicing) choice, he side-steps the questions that would have arisen if he had simply launched into myth immediately.

Mythologising has its charms, but it rescues the sophist from a dilemma. Sokrates has asserted that political excellence cannot be taught. If Protagoras replies that it can, he will run up against Sokrates’ observation that this is inconsistent with Athenian practice. Given his status as a foreigner in Athens, he must incorporate Sokrates’ (ironic) contention that the Athenians are wise while disputing the conclusion that Sokrates draws from their practice. If, on the other hand, he concedes that political skill is innate, he will be arguing himself out of a job. He must find some middle position, and this is what the myth

<sup>10</sup> Rutherford 1995: 127 observes correctly that Protagoras’ stress on pleasure is typical of the aims of sophistic epideictic rhetoric. The (false) implication that the choice of form is arbitrary rather than integral contrasts Socratic practice.

provides. The gift of political excellence from Zeus to mankind is an arbitrary narrative element, literally a divine *fiat*, which establishes without argument that *arete* is neither innate (otherwise it would have been part of man from the beginning) nor entirely dependent on teaching (since Zeus has put the capacity for it in everybody).

The myth cannily assumes precisely what the sophist has been challenged to prove, and then uses it as the basis for further explanation. Readings of the speech that see *mythos* and *logos* as equivalent to each other are the result of taking Protagoras at his word and missing his rhetorical sleight of hand. They interpret the *mythos*-section of the speech as a straightforward allegory. Thus Kerferd supposes that Zeus' gift of political skill is the same as the universal instruction in virtue by the polis.<sup>11</sup> For Taylor, 'the literal signification of the gift of these attributes by Zeus is simply the development of . . . social spirit'.<sup>12</sup> This is closer to the truth, but still does not recognise that the gift is prior to the development of social spirit or an educational system. It is difficult to specify a non-allegorical meaning for the gift, since it corresponds not to a social structure, but to the realisation that there must be such a structure in order for the polis to exist. The universal education in political skill by the polis is based on the citizens' belief that the truth is as Protagoras implies it in the myth. The *logos* that follows the myth is not an alternative but a consequence of it.

To substantiate this assertion, let us take a closer look at the structure of the Great Speech. We start with a myth which explains why it is correct for everyone to share a certain assumption, namely, that everyone has a share of political excellence (myth + 322d–323a). Otherwise there will be no city at all. Not only is this excellence essential in fact, but even the assumption of its presence is essential, as the language of 323a–b shows. It is appropriate (323a3) for all to share excellence. All people really think (τῷ ὄντι ἡγοῦνται 323a5) that this is so.<sup>13</sup> The proof, says the sophist, is that even when we know someone is unjust, we think him mad for admitting it, since the facade of justice is a social imperative. The universality of justice and political capability must be not so

<sup>11</sup> Kerferd 1953: 45. The consequence of such an argument is that Protagoras postulates virtue both as a condition and a product of social life. Kerferd's solution is that divine intervention was required to start the process, but this answer is at odds with reading the myth as a quasi-allegory.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor 1976: 81.

<sup>13</sup> Note the placement of 'really' (τῷ ὄντι). We construe the phrase most naturally with 'think' (ἡγοῦνται), but one might also take it with 'share' (μετέχειν). Protagoras might thus be saying either that people really think that all have a share in political excellence, or that people think that all really have a share in it.

much true as recognised, or society will not function.<sup>14</sup> Protagoras here implies the necessity of a discourse of justice; this is why so much of the argumentation deals with societal assumptions. We note the prevalence of verbs of speaking and of propriety. To admit injustice is madness because ‘people *say* that all people *must say* that they are just . . . on the grounds that *it is necessary* for a human being to have a share of justice in some way or other in order to be a human being at all’ (φασιν πάντας δεῖν φάναι εἶναι δικαίους . . . ὥς ἀναγκαῖον οὐδένα ὄντιν’ οὐχὶ ἄμῳ γέ πως μετέχειν αὐτῆς, ἢ μὴ εἶναι ἐν ἀνθρώποις, 323b5–c2). This formulation indicates that Protagoras is not dealing with matters of fact, but with a discourse about a necessary discourse. Society determines what people must say on the basis of what it deems necessary for its own existence. But we should note how vague the societal exhortation to justice is. The reason people must say they are just is that it is necessary that there be nobody who does not share in justice, *in some way or other*. The alternative is that it be necessary that such a person not be human. The content of justice is not defined; rather, a discourse of justice is specified. Justice is a premise of humanity, but it is an unexamined premise.

We have moved from the presentation of a shared assumption to a picture of the assumption in action. The follow-up to the myth (322d5–323a4) is succeeded by a series of arguments (323a5–324d1) based on universal political practice and on a universal discourse of justice. Protagoras next asserts that political excellence is a matter of training (323c5–9). Punishment of injustice and impiety is based upon society’s presumption that we all have a capacity for justice and that this capacity can be made operative by chastisement (punishment based on any other assumption would be irrational, like the behaviour of an animal) (323c9–324b1). The retaliatory conception of punishment is associated with the bestial and irrational. Protagoras seems to be looking back to the myth where man is distinguished from the animals by his speech and rationality even before he is given the crafts (321b6–c2, where Epimetheus assigns all his gifts to ‘irrational/speechless creatures’ [ἄλογα], is picked up by ‘irrationally’ [ἄλογίστως], like a beast’ at 324b1). It is not immediately apparent that men punish for educational reasons, but this point is crucial for Protagoras’ argument and he can make it because any other rationale for punishment has been associated with a kind of existence

<sup>14</sup> Goldberg 1983: 20 recognises that the myth establishes Protagoras’ proposition surreptitiously, but does not emphasise the crucial slide from ‘must’ to ‘do’ (although see 44). Rutherford 1995: 130 points out the inconsistency of the slide with the sophist’s later attitude towards the masses.

that man never shared, even at his most primitive.<sup>15</sup> It is the myth which makes this strong contrast believable. Conversely, the appeal to the educational function of punishment is a proof of the correctness of the myth's assertion that the capacity for political virtue is shared by all but is not natural to man (in the way that rationality is natural), and is therefore (implicitly) teachable. The two passages reinforce each other.

As well as being an illustration of belief in action, the discussion of punishment serves as transition to Protagoras' chief concern, education, and recalls his topic sentence at 323c5–9 where he claimed that people think that political excellence can be taught. It thus prepares us for the second part of the *epideixis*, the treatment of Sokrates' second argument, that good men cannot make their sons excel in their own good qualities. Here Protagoras explicitly leaves *mythos* for *logos* (324d6–7). The fundamental problem of the *logos* is set up at 324de–325a by a question that recapitulates the conclusion of the myth: is there or is there not one quality which all must have if there is to be a city at all? This question should properly be regarded as equivalent to the myth: the myth sets down as axiomatic that there *is* one quality necessary for the survival of the city and that this is political excellence. The axiom is in the form of a conditional; the *logos* will hold *only if* we presuppose the myth. If we do, Protagoras can refute Sokrates' point about the sons of good men by using an argument both of whose premises are drawn from his previous exposition. One is that all men must have *arete* (324d7–325a5), the other that *arete* can be taught (men must be taught or punished into exercising it, 325a5–b5). If both of these premises hold, Sokrates' claim that good men do not teach their sons excellence is incredible (325b2–4). Given the premises, the only conclusion is that good men do have their sons taught excellence. Once again, the argument is couched in terms of social norms: each household gives its children informal education in excellence and, if wealthy enough, formal education (325c4–326c6).

The rhetorical structure of this argument is designed to give the impression of rigorous logical procedure. The piling-up of conditionals between 324e2 and 325b4 (five of them) and the elaborate nesting of

<sup>15</sup> Unlike other accounts of the primitive state of man, Protagoras never has men living like beasts. Compare Kritias at DK 88B25. If man were naturally bestial, one might have been able to appeal to the law of retaliation as 'natural'. Protagoras does not allow this. Coby 1987: 55, contends 'human beings were not themselves possessed of reason until Prometheus purloined wisdom from the gods. According to original design, the human race was not essentially different from any other species' (compare *Prometheus Bound* 442–44). Protagoras' Prometheus, however, does not steal wisdom but technical skill (321d1). The text gives us few clues about the original divine design, but the word *aloga*, if it was present in the original text (compare Coby 1987: 192, n. 40) is surely one.

explanatory subordinate clauses is dazzling (Protagoras will later be accused of bewitching speech that makes the auditor lose track of the argument). We should not, however, let it obscure the provisional nature of the argument. Is there one thing all citizens must share? If there is, and if this thing is excellence (this is what the myth concluded), and if it is teachable, and if good men do not teach it to their sons, then this is incredible (325b3). Thus, good men must have their sons taught excellence. This is a shaky structure on which to build an argument. It depends on accepting each conditional. Yet we have no reason, as good Socratic readers, to accept any of them. The first two are asserted mythologically, and the third is based on a social practice that we have no reason to believe is informed (merely self-serving). No wonder that the conclusion is couched in the vocabulary of amazement. Moreover, the use of amazement as a criterion reminds the reader of society's disbelief when faced with the self-confessed wrongdoer. Protagoras argues from what the average person in a society believes and does. These normative beliefs rest in turn on an assumption embodied by Protagoras in a myth. The assumption that all must share in political excellence is axiomatic for the existence of Athenian democracy.

Even the discussion of why good men have worthless sons needs to invoke this axiom. If it holds that no one may be ignorant of *arete* if the city is to exist (326e7–327a2), then, Protagoras implies, it is not surprising that good men may have worthless sons. Using the example of a flute player he argues that the natural talent for excellence is not equal in all men, but that even the most unjust is a comparative saint compared to what he would be without any training (327a4–d4). The argument here is somewhat incoherent.<sup>16</sup> It does not follow from the myth that the talent for political excellence is unevenly distributed. The whole point of the myth's conclusion is that the knowledge of political excellence is not analogous to that of the practical crafts (322c3–d5).<sup>17</sup> The appeal to flute-playing is a distraction separating premise from conclusion so that the audience does not notice the troubling slide from one to the other. 'If my axiom holds', says the sophist, 'think of any branch of knowledge as an example!' The almost incantatory power of the axiom encourages us to accept without protest the hypothesis of differing natural ability in politics.

<sup>16</sup> Stokes 1986: 232–6; Goldberg 1983: 43–4.

<sup>17</sup> Ineke Sluiter points out to me that the use of *demiourgos* at 327c7, where Protagoras asserts that anyone brought up in a city will be a craftsman in virtue (cf. 327a1–2) inverts the earlier opposition between the specialist crafts (distributed only to some) and *arete* (distributed to all).

The paradigmatic power of the mythological axiom creates an implicit *a fortiori* argument. Look again at the wording of the premise: 'For if indeed what I say is so – and it is so most of all – pick out and consider any other pursuit or science whatsoever' (327a2–4). The use of the superlative marks out Protagoras' argument as holding over the widest conceivable field (corresponding to the universality of political capability). We know from the myth that the practical talents are not distributed to all, yet when the skill is necessary, even those who have no talent gain a certain competence. If the skill of flute-playing were necessary for the city, all would become relatively expert in it. The example of the flute player narrows the range of people with innate capacity and concludes that even with a smaller proportion of innate capacity, relative expertness (in flute-playing) would be attained universally. How much more so will this be the case with an art for which all have some capacity! The derivation of the axiom from the myth adds to its *a fortiori* power. The universality of political excellence – and thus its capacity for being realised – is guaranteed by Zeus and is backed by all the cultural authority of mythological representation.<sup>18</sup> Even if the analogy between flute-playing and political skill is logically lacking, it recovers its power through the dual resources of *a fortiori* construction and mythological authority. The argument asserts an analogy while simultaneously undermining it, and the confusion between these two poles is an index of a larger social confusion which the myth is designed to validate and obscure.

Protagoras' appeal to the state of nature, asserting that even the wickedest man raised in a society controlled by law is more just than a man brought up outside this framework (327c4–d4), again takes us back to the opening myth. The characteristic of a man brought up outside society is savagery (327d3), the mutual injustice which was man's lot before Zeus sent *aidos* and *dike*. But the kind of injustice which renders society impossible is presented in terms of a fiction. Such men would be like the ones whom the poet Pherekrates presented in his comedy at the Lenaia, entitled *The Savages*. The banishment of absolute injustice to the world of fiction reinforces Protagoras' point that all men have some part in justice and validates the presentation of man in a state of injustice as 'mythical'. It also makes Sokrates look as though *he* is living in a fictional world (327e1). In using myth, therefore, Protagoras employs the fictional

<sup>18</sup> The gift of Zeus represents not universal education in excellence, but the value assigned to the discourse of political excellence. Zeus' endowment indicates that society has placed the highest emphasis on the claim to justice. The difference between justice and flute-playing is conceptual only insofar as it is pragmatic. The two skills are different because we have defined them to be so.



modes of presentation which society prescribes for the portrayal of real injustice. The Athenians exorcised savage behaviour by portraying it in comedies at the Lenaia. Protagoras mentions two citizens of Athens who have presumably become a byword for injustice, Eurybatos and Phrynondas (327d6–7). If Sokrates were living among true savages, he would be glad to deal even with villains such as these. Yet these men were in fact transported to the realm of comedy by Aristophanes in the *Thesmophoriazousai*.<sup>19</sup> Athenian comedy has responded to actual anti-societal behaviour by fictionalising it, since it cannot be accommodated within the Athenian self-image. Protagorean literary practice matches the larger Athenian discourse of justice. He banishes injustice to a mythical past, aware that all men *think* that justice is fundamental. The fictional discourse of myth is the best option when presenting a picture of injustice, for injustice cannot be presented as existing *within* society. The fictionality of complete injustice is a subtle compliment both to Athens and to society in general. No matter how unjust life may seem, things could be much worse. Protagoras thus encourages a degree of complacency which is in his own best interests as a foreigner in Athens, while inviting potential customers to take advantage of his talents.<sup>20</sup> Structurally, then, the speech moves continuously from the presentation of a shared assumption to a picture of the assumption at work in society, and ends by shifting from societal to sophistic education. The speech is a highly effective unity, as *logos* picks up and develops the premise of *mythos*.

What are we to make, then, of the assertion that the *mythos* and *logos* of the speech are parallel and alternate to each other? On this reading both *logos* and myth show that virtue can be taught and explain the differences in individual virtue. The universal instruction in virtue presented in the *logos* (the acquisition through learning of the preconditions for an ordered society) is an alternative statement of the conferring of *aidos* and *dike* in the myth. The myth would thus present a projection at the divine level of forces identifiably at work on the human level.<sup>21</sup> Myth and ordinary discourse would be two equally weighted alternatives, and the choice between them would indeed be a matter only of listening pleasure. Yet we have seen that there is more to Protagoras' use of myth than

<sup>19</sup> See Taylor 1976: 98. He presumes that there must have been a similar mention of them in Pherekrates' play, but this might undermine Protagoras' point, which is a contrast of real versus fictionalised injustice.

<sup>20</sup> See Adkins 1973: 10–12 for Protagoras' speech as a *captatio benevolentiae* for the Athenian democracy.

<sup>21</sup> Kerferd 1981a: 133–5, 168.

meets the eye. The structural unity of the speech presupposes the myth as a basis for all its argumentation. Protagoras must solve two problems, why the Athenians do not recognise political specialists and why the best citizens do not pass on their own excellence to their offspring. At 324d1, where Kerferd maintains that the myth and its exposition are completed, we have only dealt with the first question. Protagoras thinks that for the second a literal exposition (*logos*) is required. Thus the *mythos* and *logos* are not alternative to each other first of all because they deal with different aspects of the set problem. A second reason is that the *logos* builds on the presuppositions laid down by the myth. The myth deals with the reason *why* virtue can be taught; the commentary on the myth and the *logos* which follows give supporting proof *that* it is so, but they have no explanatory power in themselves.<sup>22</sup> We need myth to deal with the question of origins and to give an axiomatic base which will validate the evidence which follows.

The role of social belief is a crucial element in any evaluation of the function of Protagoras' myth. The sophist is dealing not with fact, but with a universally held belief that political competence and justice should be features of all who exist within a society. This belief is a form of the social contract, and is axiomatic for the existence of the polis, or is represented as being so. Protagoras has been placed in the uncomfortable situation of having to prove this axiom and this is why myth is essential for him: its arbitrary elements establish the axiom. Since he is dealing with belief and not with fact, myth, which is not a discourse of logical proof, is ideal for representing society's assumptions about justice. The entire discussion is grounded on these assumptions; if people did not believe them, no civilisation would be possible, and, more importantly, no one would believe it possible. It is easy to imagine how a clever pupil would grasp the point that the claim to or appearance of justice is more important politically and socially than the reality, and would base his political activity accordingly. This is, of course, the problem taken up by the *Republic*.

We are faced, then, with a social belief about the necessary universality of political excellence and a myth that asserts this universality. Yet the relationship between myth and assertion is never rigorously scrutinised. We begin to see why the Protagorean account cannot withstand Socratic examination. Which is true: the proposition that all citizens are in fact endowed with shame and justice or that all citizens

<sup>22</sup> There is no qualitative difference between the exposition which follows the myth and the argumentative *logos*.

believe that they must be so endowed? Protagoras treats the two propositions as identical (328c4). His speech does a good job accounting for Athenian practice, but cannot answer such a question. Undoubtedly, a pragmatically oriented sophist committed to the man-measure doctrine would not see the need to answer it. The reader should recall the fuzziness of Protagoras' suggestion that all must share in justice somehow or other (323b5–c2). As previously remarked, the content of justice is not defined, but a discourse of justice is specified. This is entirely in line with Protagorean relativism, which begins at the level of individual sense perceptions but ends with the relativism of political values. The same wind can be either warm or cold according to how it is perceived by the person upon whom it blows (*Tht.* 152b). The case is similar for a city: 'whatever things seem to be just and noble to each city, are so for it, as long as they are its customs' (*Tht.* 167c). If the Athenians believe that all men are endowed with a capacity for political excellence, then it *is* so for them, and they are 'wise' to think so (although *Tht.* 167c suggests also a different standard of wisdom).<sup>23</sup> Man measures his society by his own conventions. Protagoras' myth, like much sophistic myth, is an expression of these beliefs. Such an account does not satisfy Sokrates. From his point of view, we cannot tell whether all share in excellence unless we first define it. We do not reach this question, however, until the end of the dialogue (361d5).

In sum, the *logos* is dependent on the myth rather than alternative to it because the myth expresses and justifies a communal assumption on which the subsequent argument depends. It is perfectly consistent for Protagoras, given his beliefs, to argue from communal assumption, and Sokrates has in fact invited him to do so by citing Athenian political practice. Yet these very grounds of discussion make it impossible for Protagoras' account to live up to Socratic standards. The use of myth as a springboard for the discussion reflects the lack of the ability, on the part of the citizens of Athens and Protagoras, to provide a rational account of the specifics of justice and shame. Sokrates spends the rest of the dialogue pressing Protagoras in vain for these specifics, but if this is what Sokrates wants, he has trapped himself by his own irony in calling the Athenians 'wise' (319b4).<sup>24</sup> The discussion goes off-course the moment Protagoras takes Sokrates at his word (a word so temptingly congenial to his own intellectual credo) and fashions his myth to reflect

<sup>23</sup> On the Protagorean defence of *nomos* (law/custom) see Kerferd 1981a: 125–6; Guthrie 1969: 63–8.

<sup>24</sup> See Stokes 1986: 202–12 on ironic ascriptions of wisdom and on Sokrates' reference to the Athenians' wisdom as 'the indispensable premiss of Sokrates' first argument'.

it. The nature of myth as a recognisable cultural construct makes it especially appropriate for representing an unproven societal axiom. The sophist's self-conscious employment of myth is not merely a charming literary quirk reflecting contemporary trends towards allegory. It casts an obscuring methodological shadow over the entire dialogue.

Thus it is clear that, as far as identifying Protagorean or Platonic elements in the myth is concerned, we can eat our philosophical cake and have it too. Protagoras is bound to use myth to explain the Athenian discourse of justice, and, I suggest, bound to use precisely this myth (or one very like it). The sophist displays a remarkably cunning conception of the usefulness of myth, one which goes far beyond his deprecating remark that *mythos* is more delightful than *logos*. Indeed, as I have suggested, this remark disguises the fact that myth does things which ordinary argumentation cannot: it satisfactorily represents the axiomatic basis of civilisation, which is a system of beliefs rather than verifiable propositions, and serves to fictionalise the Athenians' worst fears about human injustice. For all its anthropological colour, Protagoras' mythical account is a conservative undertaking (one need think only of Euripides to conceive other possibilities). We might compare it to Homeric or Hesiodic poetry in its codification of social assumption. From the Platonic point of view, the very elements that make myth a useful methodological tool for Protagoras make it unsuccessful philosophically. Plato embeds the myth in the dialogue in such a way that a careful reading will expose its shortcomings. Protagoras' manipulation of myth is designed to keep his audience from examining the assumptions on which they base their daily life. Plato's manipulation, as we shall see, is more subtle and exploratory.

#### SOKRATES AND PROMETHEUS

Protagoras considers himself the heir of the great poet-educators of the past. His myth in the Great Speech is delivered in his own voice, and mythological role-playing seems to be absent. This impression is deceptive. Plato makes Sokrates and Protagoras play out in their own persons the opposition between Prometheus (Forethought) and Epimetheus (Afterthought).<sup>25</sup> He continues a sophistic tradition, but with a difference, since he problematises the role-playing. The stakes are high: the soul of Protagoras' potential pupil, who will have to make his own

<sup>25</sup> So also Gagarin 1969: 140; Goldberg 1983: 8, 304 and n. 29; Coby 1987: 172–7; Miller 1978 (most fully).

‘Choice of Herakles’ depending on his assessment of the correct ethical and political paradigm. The use of an embedded myth to enrich the philosophical resonance of the dialogue is common practice for Plato in his middle period. The *Protagoras* is an early instance of this method, and allows us to juxtapose Protagorean (or, more broadly, sophistic) and Platonic myth and observe the philosophical implications of the difference. The dialogue thus embodies a double manipulation of myth, displaying both Protagorean and Platonic *mythos* and *logos*. In appropriating Protagoras’ myth, Plato transforms and critiques it.

Plato conjures up the figure of Prometheus twice by using the verb *prometheomai* (‘exercise forethought’). The first instance comes at the beginning of Sokrates’ interaction with the sophist, the second at the end. Sokrates asks Protagoras whether their conversation concerning the education of Sokrates’ friend Hippokrates should be public or private. Protagoras replies,

You show correct forethought on my behalf Sokrates. When a stranger comes to great cities and persuades the best of the young men to leave off their associations with others . . . and to associate with him in the belief that they will become better, he should take care. For in those circumstances he is liable to engender great envy, ill will and plots against himself. (316c)

The great sophists of the past, he goes on, tried to hide their trade. But it was useless; they could not deceive those in power. His practice, therefore, is to admit that he is a sophist.

This passage showcases Protagoras’ confidence and urbanity. He adopts a rhetorical strategy that casts Sokrates as a cautious worrier on his behalf. Sokrates exercises forethought, but that forethought is trumped by Protagoras’ superior political expertise. The sophist has identified the real power at work in cities (the elite citizens), and has taken measures to protect himself. These measures include both a declaration of his sophistic profession, and other unspecified ones (317b6–7). His vagueness about the latter is doubtless meant to whet the appetite of potential pupils for the acquisition of the unspecified skills of civic self-preservation and success. Protagoras casts himself in the role of forethinker and one-ups Sokrates, who, Protagoras wants us to think, was concerned for him only because he did not recognise Protagoras’ political skill. Protagoras’ opening gambit is an exercise in forethought both on the level of content and on that of strategy. He demonstrates his caution but is aware that he is engaged in contest with Sokrates and takes the opportunity to position himself advantageously.

He does not deceive Sokrates, however, who quickly grasps the advertising strategy. 'I suspected that he wished to make an exhibition to Prodikos and Hippias and to preen himself because we had come as admirers of his' (317c6–d1). Sokrates acknowledges Protagorean forethought, but reduces it to rhetorical cleverness. Protagoras claims to be thinking about his life and livelihood, but is merely looking for a chance to show off. We should contrast this with Sokrates' forethought at the beginning of the dialogue, both with regard to mundane details such as the best time to visit the house of Kallias, and in his immediate concern for the well being of Hippokrates' soul.<sup>26</sup> Protagoras has not yet delivered his myth and we cannot therefore yet be thinking in terms of the character of Prometheus. We do, however, sense a tension over differing modes of forethought. After Protagoras' myth, we suspect that the question of whether Sokrates or Protagoras is the forethinker may be fundamental for the entire dialogue.

The second pointed use of *prometheomai* comes at the end of the dialogue, and this time Plato draws the parallel explicitly. The discussion has resulted in paradox. Sokrates had started by asserting that virtue could not be taught, but ends by stating that it is knowledge, whereas Protagoras had thought that virtue could be taught but ends by insisting that it is not knowledge (361a–c). At this point Sokrates suggests starting from scratch with a definition of virtue:

I wish that, now we have gone through all this, we could also arrive at a consideration of what excellence is and then investigate again whether it can be taught or not, so that that Epimetheus doesn't go on deceiving and tripping us up even in our investigation – the same way that, in your story, he neglected us in his distribution. I liked Prometheus more than Epimetheus in the myth, too. I take pains with all these matters because I use him as my example and exercise forethought (προμηθεύμενος) for my whole life (361c4–d5).

The intersection of the mythological paradigm with the subject matter of the discussion draws the threads of the dialogue together and confirms that the paradigm has methodological implications.<sup>27</sup> This is as close as Sokrates comes to an assertion that he is a philosophical Prometheus. By implication, Protagoras must be Epimetheus, rushing to claim an unjustified expertise. Clearly, Prometheus and Epimetheus stand for certain types of argumentation, as was implicit in the myth.

<sup>26</sup> 312b–314b. Sokrates takes forethought for the dangers that pertain to the soul, and Protagoras for those that pertain to bodily safety.

<sup>27</sup> As Coby 1987: 175 states, to talk about teachability before making a definition is a classic example of afterthought.

When Epimetheus persuaded Prometheus to let him make the distribution, he suggested, ‘after I have distributed, you inspect’ (ἐπίσκεψαι, 320d7). As has been noted, Prometheus and Epimetheus reverse their proper roles here,<sup>28</sup> but we should remark the coincidence of vocabulary between Epimetheus’ imperative to Prometheus to inspect, and the verb ([ἐπι]σκέπτομαι) that Sokrates uses frequently for philosophical investigation.<sup>29</sup> The greater part of the dialogue is spent in an inspection of the implications of Protagoras’ views on political excellence. In mythological terms, Epimetheus/Protagoras has set up a thesis that Prometheus/Sokrates must inspect. This reflects Sokrates’ refusal in the early dialogues to advance a thesis of his own. Instead, he investigates other people’s beliefs. From a structural perspective, then, Sokrates’ forethought has its Epimethean elements. This suggests that before philosophical forethought can exercise its talents, it must clear away the debris left by woolly Epimethean thinkers.

The tension between Promethean and Epimethean argumentation also plays itself out in the squabbling over who will take the initiative in the discussion. Protagoras wants to confine Sokrates to a reactive role, compelling him to respond to his own long speeches. Sokrates insists on question and answer (338e). An interactive format is less inclined to allow participation that is merely reactive and Epimethean. The sophist wants to repeat Epimetheus’ mistake: problem would lead to speech and then to reaction. Collaboration is clearly a more fruitful procedure (cf. 330b6) and can combine forethought and afterthought. One doubts whether Protagoras has thought through the implications of the roles he gives to Prometheus and Epimetheus in his myth (although Plato clearly has). The needs of anthropological narrative have caused a certain mythological incoherence. It is strange that Prometheus allowed his brother to distribute the faculties to the animals. Where was his forethought then?<sup>30</sup> Protagoras wants to be Prometheus but cannot even construct his myth (just as he cannot construct his intellectual and spiritual life) so that forethought receives its due measure.

Although intellectual discussion requires a mixture of forethought and afterthought, one’s life as a whole demands more of the former than the latter. Sokrates’ claim to exercise forethought about his life looks to the skill he had earlier argued was essential to a successful life, the art of

<sup>28</sup> Miller 1978: 23–4.

<sup>29</sup> σκέπτομαι and compounds: 313a4, 316b6, 325b3, 330b6, 332a4, 333b8, 343c6, 348c7, 349b8, 349e1, 352a5, 360e7, 361c6.

<sup>30</sup> Miller 1978: 24.

measurement. 'Since it is evident that the preservation of our life depends on a correct choice of pain and pleasure . . . doesn't it [the means of preservation] seem to be an art of measurement, an examination of excess and lack and equality with respect to each other?' (357a). The art of measurement that makes a correct life choice may justly be called forethought. This brings up another problem. Protagoras' self-preservation, his ability to live successfully in the city and pass on his expertise, is presented as a Promethean skill. He and his students measure opportunities and risks and act accordingly. But such prudential calculation, insofar as it is Promethean, ignores the importance of the gifts of Zeus, shame and justice. The Socratic art of measurement, based upon a true appreciation of the nature of civic excellence, is more likely to combine survival skills with the higher virtues. As Plato's Promethean paradigm gains force, so Protagoras' begins to falter.<sup>31</sup>

Protagorean forethought consists in prudential calculation of the safest way to live, and this is an area where Protagoras can easily outstrip Sokrates. The introduction to the dialogue, where Sokrates emphasises to Hippokrates the importance of caring for one's soul even more than one's body, attests that Socratic forethought is for the soul and its welfare.<sup>32</sup> Most occurrences of the word for soul, *psyche*, in the *Protagoras*, occur in the preliminary conversation between Sokrates and Hippokrates.<sup>33</sup> Of the remaining five instances, only two are spoken by Sokrates and one of them is a fairly neutral reference.<sup>34</sup> In the most significant one (356e1), Sokrates says that an art of measurement would reveal the truth, put the soul at peace, and thus save one's life. The art of measurement, an aspect of a Promethean lifestyle, does save one's life, but this is equated with setting the soul at rest by revealing the truth. Most of the discussion between Sokrates and Protagoras fails to focus on the nurture of the soul.<sup>35</sup> This failure to engage is a weakness in the discussion as a whole. It reflects the dialogue's emphasis on justice and excellence as a social rather than psychic phenomena. Sokrates chooses

<sup>31</sup> Miller 1978: 22, 26–7 recognises that both Protagoras and Sokrates have Promethean and Epimethean elements, but does not explore how these differ respectively.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Resp.* 441 and *Grg.* 501. In the latter passage, Sokrates distinguishes those who have forethought for what is good for the soul (again, *prometheia*), and those who look merely to the soul's pleasure (like flattering sophistic rhetoricians).

<sup>33</sup> 312b8, c3; 313a2, a7, b2, c5, c7, e1–2; 314b3.

<sup>34</sup> 326b2 (Protagoras); 329c1 (Sokrates (neutral)); 337b6 (Prodikos); 351b2 (Protagoras); 356e1 (Sokrates).

<sup>35</sup> Even when Protagoras claims that courage arises from the good nurture of the soul (351b2), Sokrates fails to explore the education of the soul as part of Protagoras' programme, but instead presses on with an identification of pleasure and (the) good.



not to draw Protagoras into a discussion of justice and the soul because he wants to explore the implications of a Protagorean (sophistic) treatment of excellence and stay on Protagoras' own ground. After thoroughly traversing this ground, we find it to be incapable of providing a firm foundation for a philosophical argumentative structure. Finally, the argument itself demands an acknowledgement of the importance of the soul and a more precise definition of what excellence is.

Sokrates was eventually condemned to death because he was seen as a sophist (among other reasons). Yet Protagoras lived happily ever after.<sup>36</sup> By Protagoras' argument, this would be because Protagoras admitted he was a sophist and thus escaped envy, while Sokrates denied it and engendered hostility. If one's goal is a prosperous existence in contemporary Athens, Protagorean forethought is superior. If, on the other hand, our goal is the welfare of the soul, Sokrates is the true forethinker. Sokrates has chosen to debate with Protagoras in prudential terms of bodily good and pleasure, an arena where he is at a disadvantage, although even here he can defeat the sophist in argument. But the shadow of the Prometheus paradigm makes us aware of another arena where Sokrates is the hero. Like Prometheus, he knows his fate if he persists in his desire to help mankind, but does so anyway. Like Prometheus in Protagoras' myth (322a1–2), he suffers for the mistakes of Epimetheus/the sophists.<sup>37</sup>

In their individual realms, then, both Protagoras and Sokrates can claim to be Prometheus. Protagoras has some trickster characteristics that remind us of the Hesiodic Prometheus. If we do remember Hesiod, however, we will recall that Prometheus was punished for his attempt to cheat the divine of its due: it is not possible to hide from the mind of Zeus (who would, of course, have to be a Socratic Zeus). Sokrates as Prometheus, however, reminds us more of the hero of *Prometheus Bound*, a martyr figure and civilising hero, who endows mankind with the benefits of civilised life and is therefore punished by a cruel and tyrannical Zeus (this would be a Protagorean Zeus who ensures social conformity). When one ponders which thinker, Protagoras or Sokrates, is Prometheus, one must ask also which version of a mythological Prometheus one has in mind, and indeed, which Zeus. The multivalence of the mythological tradition allows Plato to suggest both the difference between and

<sup>36</sup> DK 80a1, A3, A12 show that there was a popular tradition that he died in a shipwreck at an advanced age. A12 suggests that he fled Athens in the wake of charges of impiety. On prosecution for impiety in late fifth-century Athens see Wallace 1994: 133–5, who concludes that no evidence 'provides any basis for supposing that the Athenians took any form of legal action against him'.

<sup>37</sup> As Coby 1987: 177 and Gagarin 1969 have suggested.

the complexity of the Socratic and Protagorean approach to forethought. Once again, Plato is more sensitive to the nuances of the myth of Prometheus than Protagoras.

What of Epimetheus? He is characterised by Protagoras as being ‘not so very wise’, forgetful (ἐλαθεν), and ultimately at a loss (ἡπώραι) (321b6–c3). When Sokrates first objects to the sophist’s characterisation of virtue as teachable, he portrays himself as puzzled and in need of clarification. The sophist’s exhibition is designed to alleviate Sokrates’ puzzlement. When, in the course of the speech, he kindly offers to solve Sokrates’ difficulties about Athenian political practice, he twice refers to these difficulties as *aporiai* (perplexities), the noun that corresponds to the verb he used of Epimetheus.<sup>38</sup> He reads Sokrates’ familiar aporetic stance literally rather than as an heuristic device. Protagoras pictures himself solving Sokrates’ difficulties just as, in the myth, Prometheus solves Epimetheus’. He sets up his speech as structurally similar to Prometheus’ aid. His implication is that Sokrates is not as clever as he thinks he is.

Sokrates, ironically of course, seems to accept the role of Epimetheus. When Protagoras is reluctant to continue the discussion, Sokrates claims only to want to discuss matters about which he is at a loss (348c6). In the meantime, he has also appropriated Epimetheus’ forgetfulness. When he attempts to stop Protagoras from giving long speeches, he claims to be forgetful (ἐπιλήσμων, ἐπιλανθάνομαι) and therefore to need short answers only (334c8–d1). This is nonsense, as Alkibiades points out.

Let him converse both asking and answering questions, not extending a long speech in reply to every question . . . unwilling to give an account but lengthening his reply until *most* of the audience has forgotten (ἐπιλάθωνται) what the question was – since I bet that Sokrates will not forget (ἐπιλήσασθαι), except that he jokes and claims to be forgetful (ἐπιλήσμων) (336c4–d4).

Sokrates’ ironic adoption of the role of Epimetheus reveals how Protagoras is attempting to forestall real discussion. This anticipates Sokrates’ dismissal of Epimetheus at the end of the dialogue as the one who deceives in discussion. Plato forces us to conclude that the real Epimetheus of the conversation is Protagoras. Like the character in the myth, he is not as wise as he thinks he is.

#### CONCLUSION: SOPHISTIC VERSUS PLATONIC MYTH

When we ask who in the dialogue plays Epimetheus and who Prometheus, and when we ask which Prometheus (Hesiodic? Aeschylean?), we

<sup>38</sup> 324d2–3, 324e1–2, cf. 326e3–4.

engage in backward reading of the mythological tradition. Our choice of mythological paradigm is determined by our social and philosophical predispositions. The reader appropriates the tradition and reads herself into it in line with her moral and intellectual preconceptions. Is every reading of the myth, then, a sophistic reading? If Plato does nudge us towards an identification of Sokrates and Protagoras with mythological figures, how does his method differ from Protagoras'? The answer lies in Plato's open-endedness. He gives us the possibility of not one mythological reading alone, but two. One might (given a certain set of ethical preconceptions) conclude that it is Protagoras who is most truly Promethean. The Platonic use of myth in the *Protagoras* thus corresponds to the interactive dialogue form of the work.

At the beginning of this chapter I suggested that Protagoras' use of myth was paradigmatically sophistic. We are now in a better position to realise what that means. Protagoras' myth is designed to obscure the fact that it would be difficult to defend rationally the basis of Athenian democracy, at least in Socratic terms.<sup>39</sup> The myth is an expression of social consensus. While concentrating on mythological characters we tend to forget that Protagoras' *epideixis* is meant to be an argument, not an illustration of observed political phenomena. If the choice between *mythos* and *logos* were a real one, Protagoras would not have to switch from one format to another in mid-speech, as he does. The Great Speech is an *epideixis*, a display piece, but the word has implications both of rhetorical showcasing and of logical demonstration. The latter was required, but the former delivered. As an exhibition rather than a proof, it is out of place in a dialectical context. This is a failing of all sophistic mythological displays from the Platonic perspective. First, they tend to reflect unexamined communal belief, even while they work at manipulating it. Second, they pretend to scientific knowledge (*technē*), with their 'Arts of Speech', and give the impression that *mythos* and *logos* are easily separable. Their expertise, however, is handed on in mythological displays, confounding and undermining the distinction. Just as the *epideixeis* of the last chapter played off myth and logic against each other in pursuit of rhetorical success, so Protagoras, through his myth, disguises assertion underneath a veneer of argumentative proof. Plato's use of Protagoras' paradigm of Prometheus points us towards a more philosophical use of myth, one which acts as a spur towards and reflection of dialectical discussion.

<sup>39</sup> Compare Brisson 1975: 33.

## CHAPTER 6

### *The range of Platonic myth*

The sophists, as we have seen, blur the boundaries between *mythos* and *logos*. They use the former to illustrate the latter, and pretend to distinguish the two only to obscure the distinction. Given Plato's hostility to the sophists, we might expect that he would differentiate rigidly between the two and that his myths would be susceptible to easy definition. This is not the case however. This chapter, the first of three devoted to Platonic myth, will demonstrate that Platonic myth is characterised by subjectivity. By this I mean that myth lies in the eyes of the beholder and that this is connected with our nature as humans. We all fall short of philosophical knowledge, and few have the intellectual means to be aware of the status of the arguments and declarations we make. Like the sophists, Plato is aware of human fallibility, but the conclusion he draws from this is radically different. Whereas the sophists reacted with relativism and the acceptance and manipulation of social and linguistic convention, Plato wants us to work through our weakness towards secure knowledge. His belief in the immortality of the soul means that we have many lifetimes in which to achieve this. Our understanding of the status of myth is tied to context, in the broadest sense. Personal knowledge and the ability to explain it, the range and type of interlocutors present at any given conversation, the incarnation of the soul – all affect the authority of any statement. The journey towards precise knowledge proceeds best when everyone has an exact understanding of the status of their own beliefs. The ubiquity of myth in the Platonic corpus continually brings questions of discursive status to the fore.

This chapter begins with some general considerations on the necessity of a contextualising reading of Platonic myth. I shall suggest that a preoccupation with finding a single unified definition of Platonic myth has often been an obstacle to understanding it, and shall defend this assertion through an examination of paradigmatic passages in the *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*. Myth cannot be identified by content, since the

same material may function differently in different contexts. The second section therefore classifies Platonic myths by function. The practice of Platonic myth is closely connected with the themes of exhortation, leisure, play, and childishness. An exploration of these connections in the third section validates the importance of a contextualising approach. Leisure, play, and childhood (and myth) can be good or bad depending on whether they aid the philosophical quest. Their ambivalence underlines the marginal status of the philosophical life from the point of view of unphilosophical humanity and of the eternity and transcendence of the metaphysical realm. Finally, a survey of some modern interpretations of Platonic myth brings us back to the theme of this book, the use of myth to express the weakness of language.

#### PROBLEMS OF VOCABULARY, PROBLEMS OF SELECTION

How do we recognise Platonic myths when we see them? The boundary between Platonic *mythos* and Platonic *logos* is notoriously vague, and scholars have long searched for a unifying scheme under which to classify Plato's mythological material.<sup>1</sup> What are we to do when the story of Theuth and Thamos in the *Phaedrus* is not called a myth, when the ideal city of the *Republic* is (501e4),<sup>2</sup> and when Sokrates can acknowledge to Kallikles in the *Gorgias* (523a) that his account of the fate of the soul can be called either *mythos* or *logos* according to one's point of view? If myth lies in the eye of the beholder, any examination of Platonic myth runs the risk of being flawed by subjectivity. One method of escaping this risk is to confine investigation to material that Plato explicitly calls a *mythos*. Thus for Zaslavsky, 'the only safe and unprejudicial operating criterion is the simple principle that one is entitled to call a myth in Plato's writings only what is explicitly so called, and that one is not entitled to call a myth anything which is not'.<sup>3</sup> Such a conservative approach, however, results in an impoverished appreciation of Platonic myth, especially since Plato himself introduces a subjective component into the evaluation of myth.<sup>4</sup> If Plato attaches the label *mythos* to several

<sup>1</sup> For a judicious account of early interpretations of Platonic myth, see Frutiger 1930: especially 1–28; 147–77. More recent surveys of the subject include Elias 1984: 75–118 and Moors 1982: 1–33, with bibliography. See also the essay of Bowen (1988).

<sup>2</sup> '... the constitution that we mythologise in argument' (μυθολογοῦμεν λόγῳ). Note how *mythos* is brought into an association with *logos*, just as at *Gorgias* 523a1–2.

<sup>3</sup> Zaslavsky 1981:12.

<sup>4</sup> R. S. Stewart 1989: 261; cf. Smith 1985: 25–6.

kinds of discourse, if he is aware that the category is a fluid one, if we ourselves have difficulty in specifying whether an account is 'mythical' or not, this indicates that Platonic myth, like myth in general, is not a universal and univalent category. This is intentional on Plato's part. Given his doubts about the efficacy of language and of written discourse, to which we shall return, we cannot expect that he would give a stability to myth that he denies to his own dialogues. The dialogue form presents a picture of the clash of minds in philosophical discussion, while not allowing the reader to take it for granted that she has unmediated access to Platonic doctrine. It is the process of discussion that is important, of deciding which hypotheses are acceptable and consistent and specifying the criteria by which one might make such a decision. This process occurs within the dialogue, but a serious reader also engages in it as she meditates upon the text.<sup>5</sup>

The question of the proper methodology for philosophical discussion is a live one in the dialogues. When Sokrates clashes with the sophists, there may be disagreement about the validity of the types of argument he uses (one thinks of Kallikles in the *Gorgias*), but there may also be objections to his method of question and answer. In the later dialogues, interlocutors expend much energy on questions such as the proper scope of paradigms and the amount of time one should devote to their explication. Worries over the status and identification of mythological material in the dialogues are part of a larger group of questions about the proper application of forms of human discourse to philosophical discussion. Examples of such questions are 'When is it appropriate to deliver a long exposition?' 'What is the correct method for applying paradigms?' 'What are the limits of the question-and-answer form of dialectic?' 'What is the place of figurative language in philosophical discussion?' In the case of myth, we might formulate the questions thus: 'What is the nature of mythological discourse?' 'Does it have a place in philosophical discussion, and if so, will this use be merely rhetorical or can it help to discover or interpret philosophical truths?' When we ask what is and is not a myth, and ponder the criteria by which we would answer the question, we are engaging in philosophy. The use of myth (both of the word *mythos* and of tales we recognise as 'myths') in the dialogues of Plato nearly always has methodological implications, and when referring to such narratives, Plato often underlines issues of truth status. This connection of myth with method is striking; it suggests that

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Frede 1992.

the employment of myth has an innate connection with theorising on how and what we speak.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas earlier Platonic scholarship was loath to accord Platonic myth any philosophical significance, recent commentators have acknowledged its importance as a form of philosophical expression. Plato's myths can no longer be read in isolation from their philosophical context.<sup>7</sup> A contextual approach requires not only that we should read the content of a myth in terms of the surrounding arguments, but that we must explore how the philosophical and argumentative context can make a difference to the type of truth attributed to the myth and to its very evaluation as a myth. In a real sense, the myths are occasional pieces, and as in a Pindaric ode the content of and the attitude to mythological material is adjusted according to the demands of the moment. The difference is that Plato's treatment is determined by a specific philosophical project rather than by requirements of genre and patron.

If we turn briefly to two of the narratives mentioned above, the account of the soul in the *Gorgias* and the account of the invention of writing in the *Phaedrus*, we can see how issues of methodology, truth, and context play themselves out, and appreciate the shortcomings of the reductive approach whereby only narratives labelled *mythoi* count as myths. In the *Gorgias*, Sokrates' myth of the soul is introduced with the following words:

'Listen, then', as they say 'to a very fine story (*logos*)', which I think you will consider a *mythos*, but I consider it a *logos*, for I will speak to you in the belief that (ὥς) the things I am about to tell you are true. For, just as Homer says . . . (523a1-3)

Several aspects of this formulation deserve attention. Immediately before the passage cited, Sokrates offers to give Kallikles a *logos* that it is the worst of evils for the soul to arrive in Hades disfigured by injustice (522e3-6). At this point, neither Kallikles nor the reader knows precisely what type of *logos* this will be. It might well be another argument. But Sokrates introduces his account with what must have been a common narrative introduction: 'Listen to a very fine story', and marks the conventionality of the introduction with the phrase 'as they say'. A philosophical account (*logos*) transforms into a popular narrative (also

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Moors 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Annas' (1982) article on Plato's eschatological myths shows how Plato adapted a myth of judgement in three different dialogues in order to reflect the particular philosophical emphases of the three works. Moors argues for a similar methodology (1982: 57-8), and gives a sample in his examination of the myths of the *Republic* (1988).

*logos*). As if this were not complicated enough, Sokrates introduces more terminology and evaluative criteria. Kallikles will consider the account a *mythos*, but Sokrates thinks it a *logos* because it has some kind of relationship with the truth (note the subjective fuzziness introduced by the particle *ὥς*). We become aware of the imprecision of the popular usage of *logos*. A popular tale will be either a *mythos* or a *logos* depending on the truth of its content.

Even more important, the classification of the tale depends on the evaluative apparatus of its intended audience, Kallikles. He is the one who will consider it a *mythos* and he will do this in the belief that *mythoi* are old wives' tales, unfit to be believed by a man of sense.<sup>8</sup> This attitude to myth is consistent with his earlier declaration that communal standards of right and wrong are unnatural and merely conventional (483bc). He considers them a useful 'myth' perpetrated on the naturally superior by the timid majority.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, his association of philosophy with childish behaviour, and philosophers with those unfortunate people who have not outgrown their intellectual adolescence (484c–485e), inclines us to believe that Kallikles considers everything Sokrates says to be the equivalent of myths told to impressionable children by timid old women. It would do no good then, from a rhetorical point of view, to have Sokrates call his story a *mythos* without further elaboration. This would be to concede to Kallikles without a fight. What Sokrates can do is problematise the status of the account, so that our reaction, and that of Kallikles, will be tempered by reflection on the way in which Sokrates' teleological account arises from a set of consistent premises from which he has argued during the discussion. The truth of the myth stands or falls by the success of the previous arguments. For Sokrates, everything that he says is a *logos*; for Kallikles, Sokrates' entire argument (not just the concluding teleological narrative) is a *mythos*. Kallikles believes that Sokrates has based his life on a childish lie.

This brief analysis indicates that, in this instance at least, the explicit labelling of a narrative as a *mythos* does not tell us much about objective Platonic criteria for the application of the lexical item. On the other

<sup>8</sup> Cf. 527a5–6: 'perhaps this seems to you to be an old wives' tale' (μῦθος . . . ὥσπερ γράος).

<sup>9</sup> Note in particular Kallikles' assertion that the strong by nature will destroy all 'writings and trickeries and incantations and laws' that are contrary to nature (484a4–5). It is no accident that elsewhere in the corpus Platonic myth is assimilated to an incantation (*Phaedo* 114d6–7). When Kallikles mentions with contempt the way society moulds the young, 'singing incantations over them, bewitching and enslaving them' (483e6), he doubtless has in mind myths of post-mortem punishment of the kind Kephalos refers to at *Resp.* 330d7–e1 ('myths told concerning Hades, that those who do injustice here must pay the penalty there'), and similar to the one Sokrates tells at the end of the dialogue.



hand, we see that a crucial element in understanding Platonic myths is an appreciation of their context. The introduction of mythological material into the dialogues and the way it is described and evaluated is determined by the requirements of the discussion in progress.

At *Phdr.* 274bc, Sokrates asks Phaidros whether he knows how to please god in the matter of words. When asked for his opinion he offers an account that he has by hearsay, although he does not know the truth of it (274c1–2). Nevertheless, if they should discover the truth for themselves, they would no longer care for human conjectures. Sokrates then proceeds with the story: the Egyptian god Thamos refuses to approve of Theuth's invention of writing, since it is a drug not for memory but for reminding and will give men the semblance rather than the substance of wisdom. Phaidros responds rather tartly that it's easy for Sokrates to make up stories, but Sokrates points out that the important thing is not who the speaker is, but whether the content of the tale is true (275b3–c2). Nowhere in this exchange is the word *mythos* used. Does this mean that we cannot usefully call the story of Theuth and Thamos a myth? If it is not a myth, what is it? A non-factual account with a true 'moral'? How then does it differ from the *mythoi* Sokrates talks about at *Republic* 377a5–6 and elsewhere, the stories that are on the whole false but have some truth in them?

Rather than concentrating on the vocabulary Plato uses, which is clearly not an issue here, we should allow the content to speak for itself. What it tells us is that neither the speaker nor the source of an account is important compared to its message. If pressed, Sokrates would probably call the story a *logos* for the same reasons he calls his teleological account in the *Gorgias* a *logos*, but it is equally open to being called a *mythos*. Phaidros may demur that Sokrates is inventing his story, but he is easily put back on track, unlike Kallikles, for whom the question of what precisely counts as a myth is of crucial importance. The opening of the *Phaedrus* establishes that only a sophist cares to be precise in investigating the literal truth of a myth. Far more important is to investigate to what extent myths may be applied as ethical paradigms: is Sokrates more puffed-up than Typhon, or not? (229c6–230a6).<sup>10</sup> Platonic myth does not depend on the (non) occurrence of the word *mythos*. More often, it involves explicit or implicit meditation on the truth content of a narrative.<sup>11</sup> When we ask what would

<sup>10</sup> Note that the tale of Boreas and Oreithyia is called both a μυθολόγημα (229c5) and a *logos* (229d2).

<sup>11</sup> This is not, however, a universal characteristic. It is, for example, missing in the story of the cicadas at *Phdr.* 259.

make the story of Theuth a myth, we engage in a philosophical reflection on the nature and function of rhetoric that mirrors the investigation in the second part of the dialogue. The example of Phaidros should remind us not to be literal-minded sophists about it.

Philosophical myth is tied to the rational arguments which surround it, draws its strength from that context, and can influence the progression and formulation of philosophical discussion. The richness and complexity of this mythological material is of a piece with Platonic philosophical complexity; the permeable boundaries of myth reflect the elusiveness of the dialogues. This is not to say that it is impossible to arrive at general characterisations of Platonic myth, rather that we must not approach the task simplistically.

#### CATEGORIES OF PLATONIC MYTH

Frutiger's valuable study of Platonic myth combined categorisation by content (into allegorical, genetic, and parascientific myth) and analysis of function with full awareness of the richness and variety of the material.<sup>12</sup> Subsequent scholars have been less comfortable with such complexity. The category of genetic myth has proven especially attractive, partly due to a comment Sokrates makes in a discussion of falsehood in the *Republic*: since we do not know what happened in the past, mythology can be useful in constructing an account by likening the false to the true as much as possible (382c). This procedure is analogous to creating an image of philosophical truth in the realm of discourse on the soul.<sup>13</sup> In such myths fictive genesis may replace conceptual analysis, and present as separated in time things which, in reality, coexist. Examples of such myths are the cosmogony of the *Timaeus* and the origin of the state in *Republic* 2 and *Laws* 3.<sup>14</sup> If accurate history of the remote past is impossible, the closest one can come will be an analysis of the way things are, retrojected into the past.<sup>15</sup> The prominence of genetic myth in Plato should not mislead us into defining Platonic myth as genetic, however.<sup>16</sup> Such an approach is descriptive, as are all

<sup>12</sup> Frutiger 1930: 209–10. The 'parascientific' rubric is applied to myths dealing with things that are the object of opinion rather than knowledge. Frutiger is especially valuable for his insistence that mythical thought does not always express itself in the same way in Plato. Sometimes it is symbolic or fabulous, sometimes 'penetrated by rationality to the point that it becomes confused with dialectic' (4–5).

<sup>13</sup> Brisson 1982: 127. <sup>14</sup> Frutiger 1930: 190–1. <sup>15</sup> Compare Veyne [1983]/1988: 14.

<sup>16</sup> Zaslavsky 1981: 15. One problem with such a restrictive definition is that one must extend the range of the adjective 'genetic'. Thus Zaslavsky (48) has it include the 'genesis' of knowledge and writing.

analyses based on content, but lacks the important element of reflection on the discursive status of philosophical argument.

The variety of uses to which Plato puts his *mythos* vocabulary means that we cannot arrive at a simple definition of Platonic myth. Since not all Platonic myths are so labelled, a detailed catalogue would not be useful here.<sup>17</sup> A loose classification will be a useful guide, however. The categories that follow are not meant to be exclusive, and it is impossible that they should be, since a narrative can slide from one category to another depending on whether the speaker can, or wants to, demonstrate its truth status. Nevertheless, we can distinguish three classes: traditional myths such as those told by the poets, educational myths that are intended to exercise social control, and philosophical myths, which are tied to logical analysis.

The largest category of *mythos* vocabulary in Plato refers to traditional tales told by poets, old wives, and other storytellers. This is the most frequent sense of *mythos* in the *Republic*, and following in the Xenophanean tradition, such tales are often criticised for immoral content. Thus at 377d5–9 we are told that Hesiod, Homer, and others have composed false and ignoble *mythoi*.<sup>18</sup> As examples, Sokrates gives the Hesiodic stories of the castration of Ouranos and the battles of the gods against each other. Such stories must be banned in the ideal city, as must stories of heroic misconduct (391e12). In short, only myths conducive to virtue will be allowed, as when Odysseus commands his heart to endure in difficult circumstances (390d).

The function of poetry and mythology in the ideal state is educational, and this brings us to the second class. The poets of the ideal city will have the themes of their poetry dictated to them by the founders (379) and will compose hymns to the gods and encomia of good men (607a4). This type of mythologising is related to the rhetoric which persuades the crowd, rather than teaches it, at *Plt.* 304c10–d2.<sup>19</sup> Sokrates is describing it when he comments that the first narratives we tell children are *mythoi*: ‘I suppose this is a falsehood, generally speaking, but true things are in them also’ (*Resp.* 377a5–6). These stories need not actually be true as

<sup>17</sup> For such catalogues see Moors 1982: 35–54 (detailed catalogue and discussion of context, without, however, the inclusion of παραμυθ vocabulary); Zaslavsky 1981: Appendix 1, 224–9; Brisson 1982: 177–95 (with some statistical analysis).

<sup>18</sup> Smith 1985: 28–9 suggests that we should translate ψευδεῖς not as ‘false’, but as ‘fictional’; but see Gill 1993.

<sup>19</sup> The model of Platonic myth as crowd control is that with which Detienne concerns himself ([1981]/1986: 85, 93–8; compare Brisson 1982: 143–7): Plato’s philosophical project involves the rethinking of tradition and the use of political power to dictate the use of memory based on tradition.

long as they express acceptable ethics. They will usually be composed by state-controlled poets, but sometimes by philosophers. Such is the ‘Noble Lie’ of the *Republic* (414b9–c1) designed by Sokrates in his role as city-founder to inculcate a certain mentality into the citizens of his city. The Noble Lie is meant to persuade both the rulers and the rest of the city that the earth is their mother and that the members of the various social classes of the city are created by god with admixtures of gold, silver, iron, and bronze.<sup>20</sup> Such a belief would incline all the citizens to care for each other and for the city. Even the (philosophic) rulers of the city will believe in the truth of the myth if possible. The ‘Noble Lie’ thus has no philosophical and methodological implications for its intended audience (although it does have ethical and political ones). Whether created by philosopher or poets, myths of this type have an educational and moral, rather than an intellectual purpose. Mythologising rhetoric, then, can be used as an element of social control, but this would be at best reductive (and cynical) as a complete account of Platonic myth. It under-represents the more positive philosophical aspects of Platonic myth as a method for exploring truth.<sup>21</sup>

The Platonic *mythoi* that form the focus of these last chapters are part of a philosophical investigation, whether of the soul, of writing, or of the history of the cosmos. They are *philosophical* as opposed to traditional or educational myths. There is some overlap with previous categories, however. If we take the myth of Theuth and Thamos in the *Phaedrus* as an example, we see that Sokrates invents this myth (as Phaidros recognises, 275b) as a kind of philosophical propaganda on how to please god in rhetoric. We can easily imagine this kind of invented ‘tradition’, reflective of philosophical truth, being handed out to the citizens in the city of the *Republic*. The difference in the *Phaedrus* is that the myth comes after a long discussion and reflects its conclusion. The audience of the myth acknowledges therefore that its content or ‘moral’ is true. Sokrates explicitly introduces truth as a criterion for judging the value of any tradition and expects Phaidros to be able to make such a determination. Whereas the ‘Noble Lie’ of the *Republic* is imposed upon the population as an article of faith, the myth of the origins of writing in the *Phaedrus* is arrived at through analysis. The quality of the content does not differ in the two

<sup>20</sup> Referred to as a *mythos* at 415a2–3; c7.

<sup>21</sup> The three aspects of Platonic myth identified here correspond loosely to the three elements in the tripartite soul of the *Republic*. The appetitive part of the soul will be drawn to the violence and sex of traditional myths. The spirited part will have an affinity to the educational myths that train it to aim at what is honourable and good. Philosophical myth appeals to the reasoning part.

instances (both reflect philosophical truth), but the context does. Philosophical myth both has 'true' content, and is set in a dialectical context.

Whereas Plato has his characters create quasi-definitions of traditional (mostly harmful falsehood) and purified educational myth (a surface falsehood reflecting ethical truth), there is no simple definition of philosophical myth. Because it is specified by context, we can say what it does more easily than we can identify what it looks like. On a basic level, and especially in the middle period, philosophical myth is protreptic; it helps to turn people towards the life of philosophy. Of greater concern in this book is that philosophical myth achieves its intellectual power by encouraging methodological reflection and self-consciousness about the status of philosophical discourse. It is a second-order force. It exercises its power both on philosophically committed interlocutors within the world of the dialogue and on the reader of the Platonic text. It problematises the way we talk about the world and our philosophical formulations. This quality of stimulating questioning distinguishes it from the educational myth imposed on non-philosophers. Evaluations of philosophical myth that assimilate it to, for example, the 'Noble Lie' of the *Republic* pass over this essential function.<sup>22</sup> Definition of Platonic myth by content alone is counter-productive because it restricts application to levels of thought inside the dramatic world of the dialogue and deprives myth of its capacity for meta-philosophical comment.

#### EXHORTATION, PLAY, AND CHILDISHNESS

Our approach to Platonic myth should, then, be governed by the context in which myth (or material that is assimilated to myth) appears. This entails that the tone and approach of philosophical discussion are crucial. Plato relates the discourse of myth to the themes of exhortation and encouragement (*paramythia*), play, and childishness. By so doing he suggests that those who are interested in pursuing knowledge must adjust their attitudes in ways that will seem counter-intuitive to the majority of humanity. Searchers for the truth must not be contentious, but must exhibit gentleness and mental flexibility. They must take seriously things that may look trivial to others, while also recognising the weakness and fallibility of human endeavour. They must reorient their attitude to life on this earth and see it as part of larger whole. In all of

<sup>22</sup> So Dorter 1982: 166 for the myth of the *Phaedo*. Gill 1993 repeatedly uses the noble lie to illuminate his conception of Platonic myth, although he is aware that where the fabrication of the story is explicit and the audience is a party to it, the noble lie is not so useful a model (62).

these areas, philosophical contrasts with sophistic practice. Sophists aim to overwhelm and control their audience, rather than encourage them to learn. They play games with them (we think of Gorgias' 'plaything'). They consider success in this world their most important goal, and may despise philosophical endeavour as childish frivolity. *Mythos* is the appropriate discourse for leisure, play and childhood, and its association with them in all its various guises is indicative of its range and flexibility in the Platonic corpus. Just as *mythos* runs the entire gamut from lying poetic tales to philosophical theory, so one can engage in leisure and play with a variety of attitudes ranging from the trivial to the philosophical. Are Platonic myths 'serious' or just a game? Do we tell them to children or to intellectual equals? How seriously should we take our theories about epistemology and metaphysics? These are all questions of perspective, and they are all non-trivial. The perspective through which we view the integration of myth into philosophical discussion determines what kind of philosopher (or critic) we are.

Plato uses vocabulary from the *paramyth-* stem to express philosophical encouragement or exhortation.<sup>23</sup> Like philosophical myth, it can be educational or philosophical, but it has no consistent connection with mythologising. *Paramyth-* vocabulary occurs most frequently in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, as we would expect in works that emphasise so heavily civic education. In general, it occurs in contexts where there is stress on the adjustment of attitudes inside a philosophical discussion or marks the attempt by a philosopher to impart insight to a non-philosopher. Both inside and outside of dialectical discussion, *paramythia* is associated with the gentle and encouraging tone proper to the true philosopher. Participants in philosophical debates can be encouraged to continue or speak their true opinions. Outside the debating context, the philosopher can speak to the non-philosopher gently and present to him argumentation in such a way that he accepts it as a guide to virtue, even though he may have no active understanding of it.

Educational *paramythia* is not, as has been suggested, associated with a 'soothing, trustable lie', either in the *Republic* or the *Laws*.<sup>24</sup> The *Republic* speaks of 'encouraging' (παραμυθουμένη, 442a2) the spirited

<sup>23</sup> E.g. παραμυθία, παραμύθιον, παραμυθεῖν, εὐπαραμύθητος, δυσπαραμύθητος, ἀπαραμύθητος. See Brisson 1982: 150 (with Appendix 4). In the *Laws*, the sense of 'exhortation' is assimilated, in a play on words, to 'myth that precedes the law' (ὁ πρὸ τοῦ νόμου μῦθος) (Brisson 1982: 166, 195); Zaslavsky 1981: 209–13: 'a preparatory, soothing, trustable lie'.

<sup>24</sup> Zaslavsky 1981: 210. Although Zaslavsky acknowledges that these lies may be in some sense true, in that they deal with things beyond rational certitude, he still goes beyond the evidence in asserting that all paramyths are lies (even in a weak sense).

part of the soul with music and gymnastics. At 476e1, the lover of sights and sounds who acknowledges no distinction between opinion and belief must be won over (παράμυθεῖσθαι) gently (although not mendaciously), and the method is to be dialectic. Similarly, at 499e1–2, faced with the necessity of convincing the multitude that philosophers should be allowed to rule, Sokrates says that one should make this demonstration ‘in a spirit not of contention but of encouragement’ (μὴ φιλονικῶν ἀλλὰ παράμυθούμενος), revealing the true nature of philosophers. Here, as at 500b1–6, the content of the encouragement is philosophical argumentation, and the verb παράμυθεομαι is regarded as constitutive of the proper tone of philosophical discourse. The contrast is not between truth and falsity or verifiability and non-verifiability, but between well-intentioned philosophical persuasion and sophistic browbeating.

*Paramyth-* vocabulary in the *Laws* is associated with the preambles to the various laws proposed by the Athenian Stranger. As Brisson has remarked, these exhortatory preambles often have mythological resonance,<sup>25</sup> although this can be faint. More significant than the presence or absence of myth in the preambles is that the Stranger characterises them in a way that reminds us of the philosophical exhortations of the *Republic*. In Book 4, 719c–723c, he contrasts doctors for slaves with doctors for free men. The former merely give prescriptions, whereas the latter engage in discussion with the patient and explain their treatment. So too the law-giver should not just prescribe and threaten, but should give encouragement (παράμυθίας) and persuasion (720a1–2).<sup>26</sup> The law-giver does not merely impose a myth of virtue on his subjects, but works to effect a change in attitude by presenting arguments that are philosophical in nature. We should not, however, conclude that the law-giver of the *Laws* engages his subjects in philosophy in the full sense of the word, that is, dialectically. The exhortations of the *Laws* are philosophical *epideixeis*; the audience is not expected to respond with objections and second thoughts. If they do not come to the correct philosophical beliefs through rigorous discussion, they are not doing philosophy but are won over by well-grounded philosophical rhetoric.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Brisson 1982: 200–2.

<sup>26</sup> Examples of such ‘paramythic’ preambles: 773e5 (explaining the necessity of appropriate wedlock); 854a6 (explaining the undesirability of temple-robbery); 899d6 (admonition of those who deny that the gods take note of the affairs of men). The precise nature of this persuasion has been a matter of disagreement. Does it operate irrationally and instil false but useful beliefs? Or is the persuasion rational? Bobonich 1991 gives a good summary of the problem, with a review of past bibliography, and opts, correctly, for the latter alternative. See also Laks 1990: 222 and 226.

<sup>27</sup> On the ‘monological’ (as opposed to ‘dialogical’) nature of the *Laws*, see Nightingale 1993.

*Paramythia* also has its place in philosophical discussion and protreptic, however. At *Euthd.* 277d4, Sokrates encourages (παράμυθούμενος) the youth Kleinias, who is discouraged by the intellectual games of the sophist Euthydemos. Sokrates remarks (288b7–c6) that the sophists are not willing to give a serious (σπουδάζοντε) demonstration of their wisdom but are imitating the Egyptian ‘sophist’ Proteus. Proteus was the sea god who would not answer any question unless you grasped hold of him through many changes of shape and forced him finally to resume his true form. The audience must therefore beg and encourage them (παράμυθώμεθα, 288c4) to reveal their true selves. The collocation of *paramyth-* vocabulary with that of play and seriousness is designed to put the sophists in a bad light. They play when they should be serious and have no interest in advancing the discussion. The wording emphasises Sokrates’ concern for Kleinias and the sophistic failure to adopt the proper philosophical tone. We should contrast Sokrates’ behaviour at *Resp.* 450–1. Glaukon attempts to encourage Sokrates to expand on his ideas about the community of women, children, and property by stressing the goodwill of the audience. Sokrates is reluctant to be encouraged because he does not believe he is speaking with knowledge. Nevertheless, Glaukon’s philosophical exhortation is successful and Sokrates is persuaded to speak (εὔ με παράμυθῃ, 451b1, cf. 450d9). Because of the seriousness of his task, the philosopher may need encouragement when propounding theses that may seem counter-intuitive. He needs to be reassured that his audience will listen to him with the mental reserve proper to the reception of speculation.

Hedging a discussion with reserve is standard Platonic practice in the introduction and discussion of philosophical/mythological speculation. Philosophical encouragement in the *Euthydemus* and *Republic* passages glanced at here draws its force from requiring the interlocutors to become aware of varying levels of discursive seriousness and commitment to truth. Not only are the participants exhorted to continue with the discussion, they are encouraged to ponder the status of the arguments employed. This exhortation is based on methodological self-awareness and is thus akin to the philosophical employment of myth in a dialectical context. How mythic is *paramythia*? Semantically, *mythos* and *paramythia* share a root that signifies ‘discourse’, and it may be tempting to leave it at that. Yet *paramythia* can be mythological, and it shares a function that overlaps to a significant extent that of Platonic myth, as a tool for indoctrination, teaching, and philosophy. Like Platonic myth, it draws its discursive status from its context. As we might expect, then, the



boundaries between educational and philosophical *paramythia* are permeable. All philosophy is educational, and sometimes persuasive education shades towards philosophical discussion. It is a mistake, therefore, to think of strictly demarcated realms of paramythic discourse. Exhortation and encouragement take their colour from the kind of discourse into which they are inset, and can be more or less philosophical. Their rhetorical flavour makes them especially suited to educational discourse, but they are not confined to it. The extent to which they can be fully philosophical will become apparent in the treatment of the *Phaedo* in the next chapter.

Whereas *paramythia* always has a positive connotation, the theme of play has a more complex role (as we saw in the brief consideration of the *Euthydemus* above). Play can be a childish game, an educational tool, or a metaphor for philosophical activity. It thus covers much the same range as myth, and the two are sometimes associated. It has long been recognised that the concept of play has a significant place in Platonic philosophy.<sup>28</sup> The educational schemes of the *Republic* and the *Laws* rely on the formative properties of play to train the young. Children must engage in more lawful play than they currently do, since it is impossible for them to become lawful and serious (σπουδαίους) citizens if their play is unlawful (*Resp.* 424e5–425a1; cf. *Leg.* 643b4–d3, 819a8–d3). It is not just a question of getting an early educational start. Rather, the minds of the young cannot bear too much seriousness. Educational songs prescribed for the young to ensure psychic harmony are really spells, which are called games (παίδισι) (*Leg.* 659d1–e5). Play is also important because it is unfitting for a free man to be compelled to learn intellectual lessons. Enforced knowledge simply does not stick (*Resp.* 536e–537a2). In both the *Republic* and the *Laws*, play is an opportunity for efficient training and is the correct mode for dealing with the intellectually naive: we cannot be serious too soon, and misplaced seriousness is counterproductive. This type of play has obvious affinities with the educational use of myth. We are surely to imagine that some of the educational song-games prescribed in the *Laws* and *Republic* are mythological.

Play is not just for children, however. Sokrates' famous irony, with its concomitant irritations and attractions, is also a form of play. Alkibiades in the *Symposium* perceives such play as constitutive of the Socratic persona, comparing it to a sculpted Silen whose ugly exterior opens to reveal a golden statue.<sup>29</sup> Sokrates cares nothing for worldly wealth and

<sup>28</sup> Guthrie 1975: 56–65.

<sup>29</sup> For further examples of Socratic playfulness, see *Menex.* 235c6, *Crat.* 406b9–c1, *Philb.* 28c2–4.

spends his life being ironical and playing (or maybe 'joking': εἰρωνεύόμενος δὲ καὶ παίζων, 216e4); Alkibiades does not know whether anyone has ever seen the treasures of Sokrates' wisdom when he is serious (σπουδᾶσαντος, 216e5). One may well wonder, however, whether Alkibiades has misread the perceived dichotomy between Socratic play and seriousness. He attributes the same kind of play to Sokrates as Sokrates does to the sophists in the *Euthydemus*, but cannot conceive that play might in fact be a form of seriousness with methodological implications. He views Sokrates' irony as role-playing, but what if it is the irony itself that is 'serious'?<sup>30</sup> Play may express philosophical seriousness rather than gloss it over or short-circuit it; in this respect it is analogous to philosophical myth.

Socratic play displays both its light-hearted and serious sides at *Laches* 196a4–e9, a passage which makes a good deal of the relative seriousness of the interlocutors. Laches has accused Nicias of equivocating in order to hide his ignorance about the nature of courage. The place for such equivocation is the law-courts. Sokrates thinks they should give Nicias the benefit of the doubt; perhaps he does think he has a point to make. He summarises Nicias' position by way of a proverbial joke: the sort of knowledge that Nicias says courage is (knowledge of the grounds of confidence and fear) is not 'what every sow would know'. Having indulged in this rhetorical extravagance, Sokrates hastens to add 'I don't say this as a joke (παίζων, 196e3), but because I think it necessary for someone who holds your position to acknowledge that no animal has courage.' Sokrates is concerned to underline the seriousness of a point made through playful exaggeration. So we have a situation where Nicias is trying to make a serious point that is regarded as irresponsible quibbling and forensic play, and Sokrates draws out the implications of his argument by a humorous proverb. Assertions and accusations of seriousness and non-seriousness are part of each interlocutor's discursive strategy, a means of one-upping one's opponent, disarming possible criticism, or emphasising one's engagement with the problem at hand.

<sup>30</sup> On the role-playing vocabulary in this passage, see Bury 1932: 148–9, *ad* 216d. Rutherford 1995: 202–3 notes the interplay between play and seriousness in this passage: one cannot say that Sokrates' narrative about Diotima is serious and that Alkibiades' speech is purely comic. 'Alcibiades' reference to the ironic play of Sokrates, which masks a deep seriousness, can be extended to the art of Plato himself.' If something may be amusing without being trivial, then comic speeches may convey serious thought through jesting. Rutherford's approach is attractive, but I am inclined to think that the merging of play and seriousness is even more thoroughgoing than he acknowledges, not so much a masking of seriousness by play as a convergence of the two concepts (why should we take Alkibiades' word for the nature of Socratic play, seriousness, and wisdom?).

It is clear that the presentation and reception of argument is influenced by the manoeuvring of speaker and audience to establish both the seriousness of their respective *bona fides* and the seriousness appropriate to the context. The assertion that someone is joking is a standard form of attacking a dubious proposition. Inexpert argumentation may be regarded as a joke even when it is not so intended. In the *Theaetetus*, Sokrates remarks that if anyone ever tries to tell him that elements do not give clearer knowledge than complexes, ‘we shall consider that he is joking (παίζειν), whether he wishes to or not’ (206b11). Similarly in the *Protagoras*, the assertion that Prodikos is joking is used to exit swiftly from an unfruitful line of argumentation (341d7).<sup>31</sup> In other contexts, such an assertion can call attention to a breakdown in the argument, as when Sokrates accuses Meno of playing with him by refusing to give a definition of virtue (*Meno* 79a7).

Plato uses the opposition of play and seriousness to characterise the difference between eristic and dialectic. Eristic is, of course, the characteristic sophistic mode of argumentation. At *Thl.* 167e, Sokrates accuses himself of argumentative injustice by failing to distinguish between an argumentative contest and a discussion. In the former, one is justified in playing games with one’s opponent and trying to trip him or her up (παίζη τε καὶ σφάλλη, 167e5), but in the latter one is serious (σπουδάζη, 167e7) and aims at correction. Similarly, the discussion of not-being in the *Sophist* starts with the exhortation to speak seriously, and not in a spirit of strife or play (237b10–c1).<sup>32</sup> The sophist’s claim to teach many things in a short time is a form of play (παιδιάν, *Soph.* 234a10); he is an imitator of what is real and this imitation is play (*Soph.* 235a6–7). Play is thus connected with word games, meaningless equivocation, and the figure of the sophist. We have seen above how the competitive sophistic spirit contrasts with the gentle encouragement of the philosopher. It is also in the *Euthydemus* that the two brother sophists are repeatedly described as playing and are requested to be serious (to no avail).<sup>33</sup>

The metaphor of play, which Sokrates turns against the sophists, can, however, be deployed against philosophy. When Crito attempts

<sup>31</sup> Both devastating and unfair, given that Sokrates egged Prodikos on to such an interpretation in the first place.

<sup>32</sup> So too *Resp.* 539c5–d1 contrasts the older man who practices philosophy moderately with the young who have a craze for refutation and who play games of verbal contradiction to amuse themselves.

<sup>33</sup> Most notably: *Euthd.* 277d9–278d1; 283b4–c2; 288b7–d4; 293a1–6; 294b1–4: all are passages deserving more detailed exposition than is possible here (for a fuller treatment see Roochnik 1990–1). On eristic and dialectic in this dialogue, see Chance 1992.

to convince Sokrates to flee from prison, Sokrates asks him whether he should act in accordance with his past convictions. Were these convictions simply a nonsensical game? (ἦν δὲ παιδιὰ καὶ φλυαρία ὡς ἄληθώς; *Cri.* 46d4–5). The question is asked again at 49a9–b1. Is it true, as they had thought, that doing injustice is never right, or did they not notice, when they thought they were conversing in earnest (σπουδῇ), that although they were men of an advanced age they were no different from children? Although Sokrates himself does not believe this, he has some difficulty in convincing Crito.<sup>34</sup> Philosophical discourse risks being associated with childishness and self-deception by those who are not committed to it. If even Crito is tempted to dismiss philosophy, how much more will the sophists and their pupils despise it!

This is the scenario in the *Gorgias*, where the themes of play, seriousness, and childishness are prominent and closely correlated with mythologising. Polos attempts (unsuccessfully) to relegate Sokrates to the rhetorical nursery with his observation that even a child could refute Sokrates' argument that those who commit injustice are unhappy (470c4–5). This theme is resumed in the confrontation between Kallikles and Sokrates. As Sokrates finishes his demolition of Polos, Kallikles asks one of the audience whether Sokrates is serious or joking (481b6–7), and then repeats the question to Sokrates himself. If Sokrates is in earnest and what he says is true, then life would be turned upside down (481b10–c4). At the end of his argument in favour of 'natural justice' he mounts an attack on philosophy. Philosophy is a delightful thing if one engages in it moderately while one is young, but excessive attachment to it is ruinous and ridiculous (484c5–8; 485a4–7). When Kallikles sees grown men philosophising, he feels towards them as he does towards those who falter in their speech and play around (τοὺς ψελλίζομένους καὶ παίζοντας, 485b2).<sup>35</sup> It is charming and appropriate for a child, but unmanly for an adult (485b2–c2). Philosophy causes Sokrates to neglect the affairs of the city, which, by implication, are the things worth serious attention (485c2–e2). By continuing to philosophise, Sokrates has in

<sup>34</sup> We may compare the reservations of Crito's acquaintance in the *Euthydemus*, who confuses the sophistry of Euthydemus and his brother with philosophy and thinks that those who engage in discussion of this sort are merely chatterers who assign an unworthy seriousness to matters of no worth (304e4–5).

<sup>35</sup> It is interesting to note in this connection that Aristotle uses the verb ψελλίζω of the obscure and faltering discourse of the early philosophers (*Metaphys.* 985a5; Empedokles; 993a15; of early philosophy in general). Compare also *An. Post.* 83a32–4: 'Good-bye to the Forms. They are twittering prattle [τερετίσματα: a word used of the meaningless twittering of birds], and even if they exist, they are irrelevant.'

effect made an institution of childhood.<sup>36</sup> Philosophy has become a speech impediment.

When Sokrates manages to trap Kallikles in contradiction, Kallikles strikes back by asserting that his concessions were only made in jest. Sokrates is just like a child, and if someone gives in to him even in play (παίζων), he accepts the concession with glee like a child (499b5–6). In response, Sokrates asserts that, on the contrary, it is Kallikles who is treating him like a child (499b9–c1) by changing his ground. The appeal to childishness sets the stage for the impasse at the end of the dialogue; Kallikles will always be able to claim that his concessions were playful and that Sokrates is too much an intellectual child either to play the game on its proper terms or even realise the nature of the game being played. Yet it is Kallikles who is in fact the more childish of the pair, unwilling to admit defeat and eager to change the rules of engagement whenever it suits him, as Sokrates points out:

You yourself mustn't think that it is necessary to play games (παίζειν) with me and answer whatever occurs to you contrary to your opinion, nor should you receive what I am saying as if I were playing a game (ὥς παίζοντος). For you see that our discussion is about the way one should live, and on what topic should a person even of small intelligence be more serious (σπουδάσειε)? (500b6–c4)

Sokrates wishes to exclude the game-playing on both sides in order to achieve serious discussion, but Kallikles is unwilling to cooperate and spends the last part of the discussion in insincere agreement.

It is in this context that we must read the myth of judgement at the end of the dialogue. Sokrates has predicted that any trial he undergoes in this life will be like that of a doctor tried in front of a jury of children with a cook as an accuser (521e4). It is the Athenians, then, rather than Sokrates, who will behave like children. All efforts to make them, or Kallikles, grow up are in vain.<sup>37</sup> But in their ignorance they think the

<sup>36</sup> So also Rutherford 1995: 154, cf. 156, 170. For Sokrates in the *Menexenus*, it is the game of rhetoric that is suited to youth. He is reluctant to deliver the funeral oration because he fears that his audience will laugh at him if, as an old man, he seems to continue to play games (παίζειν, 236c8–9).

<sup>37</sup> The playfulness and seriousness of the Athenians is an important issue in the *Euthyphro*, where it is a matter of life and death for Sokrates. Euthyphro comments that matters of religion are easily misrepresented to the crowd, who laugh at his prophecies. This is why Meletos thinks he can succeed in his prosecution of Sokrates. Sokrates replies that if all the Athenians do is laugh at him, it will be no matter (3c6–7). If they treat him as they do Euthyphro, it would not be unpleasant to spend the time in court joking and laughing (παίζοντας καὶ γελώντας, 3e1–2). If, on the other hand, they are serious (σπουδάσονται, 3e2–3), only a prophet knows where it will lead. We know that it will lead to Sokrates' death because the Athenians are incapable of understanding the nature of Socratic play, irony, and seriousness. In the *Apology* Sokrates

situation is reversed. Kallikles thinks Sokrates' myth of otherworld judgement is an old wives' tale and therefore establishes his own position as a moral and intellectual child in comparison with Sokrates. The uncertain status of the teleological myth symbolises the problematic communication between Sokrates and Kallikles. Evocations of myth, play, seriousness, and childhood problematise the status and intentions of the speakers in the dialogue. We must ask who is in earnest, who is merely playing, and what types of speech are appropriate for which intentions. Nor are there simple equations to be made: all speakers think they are serious, all are accused of childish playfulness. As sympathetic readers of the Platonic text, we are likely to agree with Sokrates, but even if we do we are left with a heightened awareness of the pitfalls of philosophical discourse in the face of an unsympathetic audience.

Plato clearly disapproves of play for the sake of mere amusement and eristic victory. The example of Sokrates, however, has raised the suspicion that philosophers may engage in a very different kind of play, one which merges with seriousness. Thus the discussion of the *Laws* can be described by the Athenian as 'old men playing a moderate game about laws' (685a7–8).<sup>38</sup> The account of the sensible world in the *Timaeus* is described as a 'sensible and moderate game' in which the philosopher may indulge without regret when he takes a break from meditation on the eternal (μέτριον . . . παιδιὰν καὶ φρόνιμον, 59d1–2). The aged Parmenides refers to his upcoming demonstration of philosophical method as a 'laborious game' (πραγματειώδη παιδιὰν παίζειν, *Parm.* 137b2), a paradoxical description that captures nicely the blending of work and play in philosophical discussion. Too much seriousness may be inappropriate, as we learn when Sokrates in the *Republic* apologises for being too much in earnest (σπουδαιότερον) when defending philosophy against her detractors (536c4–5); he had forgotten that their discussion was a game (ἐπαίζομεν, 536c1). We are reminded that the construction of the ideal city and its educational system is a game, just as it is a *mythos* (501e4).

acknowledges that his narration of the story of Chairephon and the Delphic Oracle (which stated that nobody was wiser than Sokrates) might seem to be a joke (παίζειν) (20d4–6). Sokrates can have no confidence that the Athenians will know when he is speaking seriously. Certainly they did not see the humour in his suggestion that his sentence should be a lifetime of dinners in the Prytaneion.

<sup>38</sup> When Klinias wants the Athenian to construct a preamble to a law, he suggests that they avail themselves of the licence granted to those playing games, that is, to make a fresh start (723d8–e2). The flexibility of game-playing is a valuable model for the philosophical process.

The mingling of philosophical play and seriousness reminds us of the provisional status of the arguments contained in the dialogues. In the absence of knowledge (which no one in the dialogues has attained), all philosophical accounts are liable to revision in light of future investigation. The same prudent reserve will lead us, in Chapter 8, to acknowledge that all accounts have something of *mythos* about them. In my discussion of philosophical *paramythia* above, I stressed that the philosophical enquirer needs encouragement, given his lack of sure knowledge, to propound hypotheses that seem novel or counter-intuitive. Apart from expressing prudent reserve, philosophical playfulness also marks the radical nature of such hypotheses. The Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* (688bc) underlines a radical argument by bringing up the opposition between play and seriousness. The most interesting philosophical proposals are likely to seem counter-intuitive to the non-expert, and hesitating between the poles of play and seriousness is an implicit acknowledgement of the marginal status (for ordinary people) of philosophical discussion. This point is made again in the *Republic* when Sokrates proposes the equal education of women. He admits that his ideas might seem laughable (452a7), but says that one must request the sceptics to be serious (σπουδάζειν, 452c6) and acknowledge that only what is evil is laughable and that one should be serious only about the good (452d6–e2). If, therefore, someone wishes to discuss the extent to which female nature can share tasks with the male, one should accommodate him, whether he wishes to discuss it playfully (φιλοπαίσμων) or seriously (σπουδαστικός) (452e5–6).

Even something intended to be playful may be serious if it concerns a serious topic. Since Platonic dialogues all concern serious topics, this should help us in our evaluation of philosophical play.<sup>39</sup> Even the disavowal of seriousness should not necessarily be taken seriously, as we see in the *Phaedrus*. There, Sokrates dismissed the myth of the charioteer as a game (παιδιᾷ πεπαῖσθαι, 265c8–9), although he thought that something useful could be extracted from it. Yet our evaluation of Sokrates' mythological game should not coincide with Sokrates' own; I shall suggest in the next chapter that the myth is expressive of the philosophy of the dialogue to a far greater extent than Sokrates admits. It is certainly necessary to take ethical and metaphysical questions seriously, but this does not have to mean that one is serious about them (in the sense of being grimly and humorlessly analytic). What is true for

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Desjardins 1988.

the interlocutors in the dialogues is equally true for the reader. We are not to forget that each dialogue is a literary construction, a game that Plato plays, albeit a serious one. The excursus on writing at the end of the *Phaedrus* concludes that literary discourse on philosophical topics is a beautiful game (παγκαλὴν . . . παιδίαν, 276e1, compare 277e6), but not worthy of much seriousness (278a1–5).<sup>40</sup> It may be that a written discourse is less serious than the living discourse in the soul, but this does not entail that it may not awake serious reflection through its play. Seriousness should be evaluated on a sliding scale. As we shall shortly see, there is a perspective from which mankind itself is not worth much seriousness. What is crucial for the enquiring soul is to be aware of the status of the discourse in which it is engaged. Play is not harmful as long as we recognize what is play, what is serious, and where the one can or should (not) merge into the other.<sup>41</sup> Conceiving of philosophical discourse as play is thus a powerful heuristic image. Like myth, it demands an awareness at once literary and philosophical.

The nexus of myth, play, and childhood helps illuminate the nature of philosophical discussion. The relationship of philosophy and childhood repays further attention. Just as play can be serious and philosophical, so childhood can model the advantages and deficiencies of the philosophical life. In particular, the image of childhood can help the thinker reorient her perspective towards life on earth. After my discussion of play, it comes as no surprise that Plato uses the image when he wants to emphasise intellectual immaturity.<sup>42</sup> Children are especially impressionable when it comes to beliefs about the afterlife; childish and irrational fears of death can terrify even adults. Thus the aged Kephalos at the beginning of the *Republic* evokes those who wake up fearful in the night, 'like children' (330e7), remembering the stories (*mythoi*, 330d7) of punishment after death. Sokrates in the *Crito* refuses to escape unjustly: 'not even if the power of the many should terrify us like children . . . sending upon us bonds and deaths and confiscations of money' (46c3–6). Faced with death, even adults like Crito return to childhood fears of the 'bogeyman'. Nor are the more philosophically expert immune. In the *Phaedo*, the fear of Simmias and Kebes that the soul does not survive death makes Sokrates compare them to children (77d7). Kebes admits

<sup>40</sup> Compare Sokrates' assertion at *Resp.* 602b8 that imitation is a game and is not serious (παιδίαν τινα καὶ οὐ σπουδὴν τὴν μίμησιν). This criticism applies to the poetry that is to be barred from the ideal city, as Sokrates explains at 608a6–7. Nevertheless, the reservation may also apply to the Platonic dialogue as an imitation of philosophical discussion. See also Ferber 1992: 146–7.

<sup>41</sup> For play as value-neutral, see *Leg.* 667e6.

<sup>42</sup> *Gr.* 464d5–7. See also *Phlb.* 65d1–2, where pleasures are also compared to children.



that there may be a child in every person who fears such things, and it is the job of Socratic argument 'to change the mind of this child so that he doesn't fear death as he does bogeymen' (77e3–7). Philosophy is the remedy for childish fears, and is thus analogous to tales told to children. It is the cure for mythological paranoia that instils a superior *mythos* of life after death, both through dialectic and through the final myth of the *Phaedo*.

There are times, however, when a child's point of view is an asset to philosophical discussion. Thus the Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist* wanted reality to be two things at once, changeable and unchangeable, like a child begging for both (249d3), and Protarkhos in the *Philebus* capitalised on the youth of Sokrates' audience to compel Sokrates to give his account: they were like children who say you can't take back a present (19de). The enthusiasm and malleability of the young are preferable to the cynicism and rigidity of established sophists and intellectuals. Paradoxically, it may be the young who are most capable of taking a topic seriously, even though they are closest to the age of game-playing. Moreover, the leisure that is associated with childhood is a necessity for philosophical discussion. It allows us the time to consider something in detail, or to make a fresh start when an approach is unfruitful.<sup>43</sup> Leisure is also an indispensable prerequisite for the telling of myths. In a sentence that nicely illustrates the interaction of myth, philosophy, childhood, education, and leisure, the educational scheme of the *Republic* is compared to a myth told at ample leisure: 'Come then, let us educate these men in discourse as though we were telling a *mythos* and had leisure' (ὥσπερ ἐν μύθῳ μυθολογοῦντές τε καὶ σχολήν ἄγοντες λόγῳ) (376d9–10).<sup>44</sup>

The question of the leisure needed for philosophy becomes even more crucial when we consider that the time scale for learning what we need to know about the soul and the world stretches beyond one lifetime. Once again, the *Republic* best illustrates this temporal framework. Sokrates attempts to avoid the discussion of communal families because he has in mind only a 'measured' (450b5) amount of discourse. Glaukon interjects that for sensible men the 'measure' (450b6) of listening to such discourse is one's whole life. This theme is continued in

<sup>43</sup> Youth and leisure: *Ap.* 23c3; *Lach.* 181e3. Philosophy and leisure: *Phd.* 66d4; *Tht.* 154e8, 172c–175c, 187d10; *Plt.* 263b1, 272b9; *Phdr.* 227b8, 258e6. For the reversal whereby philosophy leads to a lack of leisure to attend to the affairs of the city: *Ap.* 23b9; *Resp.* 500b8. The same tension about the proper use of time underlies Kallikles' critique of philosophy in the *Gorgias*.

<sup>44</sup> For myth and childhood see, e.g., *Resp.* 377ab; *Plt.* 268e4–6; *Ti.* 26b5–c2. See also Brisson 1982: 76–80.

Book 6. Sokrates has argued that philosophy should be pursued not during youth, but at a mature age. Adeimantos observes that Thrasymakhos (the belligerent sophist-interlocutor from Book 1) will surely disagree with this, but Sokrates says that he will not stop until he has persuaded him and those like him, or until:

we achieve something useful for the life when they are born again and meet with discussions of this type.

– You have spoken, he said, with a small period of time in view!

– It's nothing, I said, compared with eternity. (498d3–6)

The life we are currently living is one of many, and we must consequently learn to measure our achievement on a more than human scale. Just as the games we play in our childhood prepare us to participate in society and train us for our future life, so the philosophical games we play as adults are preparatory for a broader participation in the cycle of death and rebirth. In this context, the image of childhood is particularly resonant. Whatever our physical age, we may or may not be spiritual and intellectual children.<sup>45</sup> The level of our advancement in these latter spheres will determine the status of the discourse directed towards us and our reception of it.

This same dizzying change of perspective is evident in the *Laws*. In Book 1, and again in Book 7, the Athenian elaborates a metaphor in which human beings are described as puppets: 'Let us consider that each one of us is a divine puppet, whether put together as a plaything (παίγνιον) of the gods, or for some serious purpose (σπουδῇ τινι)' (644d7–9). As an image for depicting the structure of the soul and the passions, the puppet has much in common with the myth of the charioteer in the *Phaedrus*. As was the case with the *Phaedrus*, we may wonder how far we are supposed to press it. The question of play and seriousness relates not only to the status of the image, but to its content. We do not know whether this puppet is merely a plaything, or whether it has some serious purpose. If the former, a fundamental change of perspective is in order, and all our attempts at seriousness may be undermined.

When the Athenian is about to expound his educational system, including the kinds of songs that are suitable for men and women respectively, he breaks off with an exclamatory digression:

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Ferrari 1989:114. The shift of perspective from one to many lifetimes is explicit also at *Phd.* 107c1–5: 'If the soul is immortal, it requires attention not only for this period of time which we call a lifetime, but also for all time. Now, indeed, the danger if we neglect it would seem to be dreadful.' Note that this passage occurs in the preamble to the myth of the afterlife.

Now the affairs of men are not worthy of much seriousness (σπουδῆς), although it's still necessary to take them seriously (σπουδάζειν) . . . I say that we should take seriously what is serious (σπουδαῖον σπουδάζειν) and *vice versa*, and that god is by nature worthy of all blessed seriousness (σπουδῆς), but that man, as we said before, is a contrived plaything (παίγνιον) of god and that in truth this aspect of him is what is best. Every man and woman must comply with this character and live his or her life playing the noblest possible games (παίζοντα ὅτι καλλίστας παιδιάς), which is the opposite of what people currently think, namely that serious pursuits exist for the sake of games (τὰς σπουδὰς οἶονται δεῖν ἕνεκα τῶν παιδιῶν γίγνεσθαι) . . . We must live our lives playing games (παίζοντα . . . παιδιὰς) of a certain sort, sacrificing, singing and dancing, so that we may render the gods favourably disposed to ourselves . . . For the most part we are puppets, but with some small share of the truth. (803b3–804b4: excerpts).

The Athenian's poor opinion of man is caused by concentrating on god and the divine perspective – an evident difference in scale. We do not know the metaphysical status of even our most serious impulses. We are in a (comparatively) non-serious situation which we are bound to treat seriously. A puppet is intrinsically a toy, but we are not sure of what type; even a toy might have a serious purpose. Constitutionally, then, we have an element of the non-serious, the untrue, the unreal in our make-up, and this entails an inversion – or at least a confusion – of normal standards of what is and is not play. We are most successful in our relationship with god when we are most the puppet, that is, when we are disciplined enough to let the divine pull the strings rather than attempting to work them ourselves. The more we are aware of our status as toy, the better we shall play the game.

The noblest kind of seriousness in which we can engage on this earth is dialectic interaction. It is, as the *Phaedrus* tells us, a seriousness more noble (καλλίων σπουδῇ) even than playing in words (τοῦ ἐν λόγοις δυναμένου παίζειν), telling stories (μυθολογοῦντα) about justice and related concepts (276e1–5). This brings us back to the importance of myth. We have seen that play has a part in the dynamics of Platonic philosophy. At times it exists in a complex and fruitful relationship with seriousness. It is a characteristic mode of childhood, and as such it resonates both in the childish eristics of Sokrates' sophistic opponents, and in the self-conscious and childlike sincerity of philosophical discussion. All of these aspects of play are reflected in the Platonic deployment of myth. It exists in a complex and fruitful relationship with *logos*. It is a characteristic mode of childhood. It resonates in the unsuccessful arguments of the opponents to the main speakers of the dialogues, yet it

is also the way in which these speakers may point to metaphysical realms and render us conscious of the variety of levels of discourse and levels of truth. This consciousness is indispensable to the philosophical process. As our philosophical consciousness expands, we engage in the process of contextualising our speech and our importance. To regard myth or play as the mask behind which serious wisdom hides, or as the face we put on to make philosophy palatable, is to repeat the mistake of Alkibiades in the *Symposium*. Sokrates may look like a satyr, but his face is not a mask. The satirical persona and the method that goes with it *is* the message, not a decoy.

#### MYTH AND THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE

In this final section I shall outline some previous views on the function of Platonic myth, and shall set forth my conception of the role played by myth in expressing the difficulty of attaining epistemological certainty, and the fallibility of language. Platonic myth is a symbolic and non-analytic narrative.<sup>46</sup> It has been seen to advance themes which are addressed by philosophical method in the same dialogue, achieving results which are either insufficiently dealt with in the discussion or which are necessary additions.<sup>47</sup> It gives us a 'knowledge of theory' and 'engenders the natural movement of the soul that enables it to see the theater of Ideas'. Its synoptic view of reality delivers the soul straight to the truth.<sup>48</sup> Or there is the theory that myth expresses Plato's indemonstrable first premises. Since dialectic fails to yield sufficient conditions for certain knowledge, myth is a way of overcoming these shortcomings.<sup>49</sup> Platonic myth has thus been seen as the precursor of, the alternative to, and the completion of philosophical argument.<sup>50</sup> None of these alternatives is exclusively correct. The *Phaedrus* will show us myth acting as a philosophically informed precursor to and shortened adumbration of philosophical argument. The eschatological myths of *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* show myth as the culmination of the philosophical project of the dialogue. The *Statesman* and *Timaeus* implicate myth inextricably into the argumentative fabric of the dialogue. Platonic myth does different things in different places,

<sup>46</sup> For myth as non-verifiable narrative, see Brisson 1982: 120, 139; Brisson and Meyerstein 1995: 29–30. Frutiger 1930: 36 specified the advantages of myth as symbolism, freedom of expression, and a prudent imprecision as opposed to affirmation.

<sup>47</sup> Moors 1982: 59, 96. <sup>48</sup> Mattéi 1988: 68–9.

<sup>49</sup> Elias 1984: 36, 64, 74; cf. R. S. Stewart 1989: 275. <sup>50</sup> See the survey of Moors 1982: 9–13.

but a concern with questions of discursive status and methodology is almost universal.<sup>51</sup>

We must, however, guard against the notion that dialectic is *in principle* incapable of justifying philosophical axioms or that myth can be in any way a satisfactory substitute for dialectic. The philosophical project as Plato describes it is precisely an attempt to verify axioms and reach an unhypothesised first principle (*Resp.* 509d1–511e5).<sup>52</sup> Our examination of the *Protagoras* has shown that the use of myth to present unverifiable axioms is precisely what Plato wished to avoid. Examination of the middle-period dialogues shows that philosophical myth can only legitimately be used in conjunction with dialectic. Even dialectic, of course, cannot produce an accurate account of the minutiae of history, but a genetic account of the sensible world is not the purpose of dialectic in any case. Its goal is higher. When myth is deployed in connection with the transcendent and incorporeal world of the Forms, it expresses a belief about them and about the incorporeal soul which is either justified (although not verified) by dialectical argument or which must be so justified on a subsequent occasion. It is a metaphorical expression of the content of the dialectic path. To be sure, the task of justification is a divine one, but the philosopher comes closest to the divine of all human beings. Philosophising in the dialogues is affected by a number of factors, such as the shortness of time or the characters of the interlocutors, and we find that myth will often be used to compensate for these factors. Nevertheless, given the ideal philosophical environment one could move from mythical image to philosophical reality, to the extent that such reality is attainable and expressible in words. Myth that is not earned by argument is not philosophical, but educational and protreptic, myth.

My statement that, given the ideal philosophical environment, one could move from mythical image to philosophical reality, was hedged with a reservation: to the extent that such reality is attainable and expressible in words. My next chapter will use the eschatological myths of the middle dialogues to cash out my assertion that philosophical myth must be tied to and justified by dialectic. The remainder of this chapter will explore the important connection of myth to the *caveat* expressed

<sup>51</sup> Compare Smith 1986, who discerns five functions for myths: they are playful in a way which is vital to philosophy, they provide hypotheses for examination, they keep the dialogues undogmatic, they shift our attention to the world of the Forms, and they draw together the thematic concerns of the dialogue. In particular (26) she notes the connection of myths with the sources of intuition.

<sup>52</sup> Elias 1984: 201–2 does indeed believe that axioms cannot be verified and considers the unhypothesised first principle itself a myth. Compare also J. A. Stewart [1905]/1960: 74 ‘Myth . . . is rightly chosen by Plato as the vehicle of exposition when he deals with *a priori* conditions of conduct and knowledge.’

above. The philosophical environment is never ideal, and myth symbolises this. Myth is defined by contextual function and reflects the imperfections imposed by context. These imperfections range from vicious interlocutors like Kallikles, to shortness of time due to the imminence of Sokrates' death, to the distortion introduced by the incarnation of the soul, to the instability of language itself. The last two issues are of particular interest here, and raise two questions. To what extent is knowledge attainable by a human being, and to what extent can it be expressed in words?

These are, of course, contentious issues, and I cannot do them full justice here. As I implied above, I think Plato believes that philosophical knowledge is attainable in principle. To be sure, this knowledge is extremely difficult. It is 'presented as being of – almost – superhuman (or "divine") difficulty'.<sup>53</sup> Plato never presents Sokrates as having such knowledge.<sup>54</sup> It is uncertain whether he thought he possessed it himself, or if he did think so, whether he would admit it (especially in writing). When Sokrates describes the philosopher's project in the narrative of Sun, Line, and Cave (*Resp.* 506c–519c) he has the enquirer start with analysis of sensible objects, and then move towards perception of the intelligible realm by means of abstraction. Yet he can only describe this procedure through analogy with the visible realm, using the sun as a metaphor for the Good. The discussion of the Good itself is put off for another occasion, and as Sokrates concludes the analogy, he refers to it as his 'hope' and comments that only god knows if it is true (517b4–6; cf. 506c–e).<sup>55</sup> Because we are tied to the sensible realm, it is difficult to tear our gaze away from it. Until the ascent to the intelligible realm is achieved, we will be compelled to use metaphor and analogy. Plato's use of myth reflects this difficulty. It is an image set into narrative motion. It symbolises the content of the long analytic task and the relationship this task has with the individual soul, mediating between the intelligible realm and the individual. Achieving philosophical knowledge is an ideal.<sup>56</sup> The dialogues point us in the right direction, but do not demonstrate or guarantee success.

The *Seventh Letter* develops the theme of the uncertainty of human knowledge. Knowledge of any thing comes about through names, definitions and images, but even knowledge is not the thing itself (342b–d). There seems, moreover, to be an implication that even knowledge is somehow defective (343b). Thus Gadamer argues that knowledge, because it belongs to our intellect's stream of life in the

<sup>53</sup> Gill 1992: 157.

<sup>54</sup> Ferber 1992; cf. Gill 1996: 282–3.

<sup>55</sup> Ferber 1992: 144.

<sup>56</sup> Gadamer 1980: 110; Ferber 1992: 146.

world of becoming, has an innate 'distortion tendency'; it brings itself to the fore and suppresses that which is displayed in it.<sup>57</sup> This is not made explicit in the letter, however, and there seems to be some confusion over the role of knowledge: after speaking of the inaccuracy of the four (presumably name, definition, image, and knowledge) (343b), the author remarks that even in the well-trained person, consideration of the four in turn barely produces knowledge (343e). What seems clearer, however, is that language itself produces distortion. Plato, we are told, has never written a composition on the subjects he thinks important. Philosophical knowledge cannot be spoken like other studies; it comes after long concentration and companionship, generated in the soul like a spark which then nourishes itself (341c1–d2). The 'weakness of words' makes it difficult to express what is (342e2–343a1). Words are unstable, and the same thing goes for definitions, since they are made up of words (343a9–b6). The limitations of language are brought forward again in the *Timaeus*. Words that relate to the intelligible world should be stable and unchangeable – as far as it is possible for words to be irrefutable and unchangeable (29b3–c1).

The instability of language also emerges from the debate over nature and convention in language in the *Cratylus*. As Sokrates constructs playful etymologies for the names of the gods, he comes to the goatish divinity Pan. 'Speech signifies everything (τὸ πᾶν) and is always moving things in circles and revolving and has two forms, true and false' (408c2–3). The true part is the upper part, which is smooth and sacred (like the human torso of the god) whereas the false part is below and is hairy and goatlike (corresponding to the lower limbs of the god). It is in this part of language that, for the most part, myths and falsehoods are found; they pertain to the 'tragic' or 'goatish' life (408c5–9). Sokrates asserts that language has a dual nature, and this raises the problem of how one might distinguish true and false speech. Falsehood lives only in the majority of men (408c6–7), and this allows hope that philosophers may come closer to truth in language. Yet how are we to divide Pan at the waist without destroying him? Words are images that resemble the realities they represent, but there is always a gap between image and reality, more in some cases and less in others (432b–d). In the present state of affairs, resemblance must be supplemented by convention (435c). The best speech has the greatest resemblance to reality, but Sokrates qualifies this prospect: it will only occur as far as is possible (435c7–d1). The ideal situation would be to learn from the truth itself without the use of images,

<sup>57</sup> Gadamer 1980: 103–5.

but this project may be beyond Sokrates and Kratylos (439a–b). In any case, the dialogue concludes, no sensible man will entrust himself and his soul to names (440c). The cumulative effect of these arguments is to open up a gap between language and reality. If true insight will not result from language but through the truth itself, it is unlikely that such insight could be transmitted by verbal means. This is especially true in the case of the real objects of knowledge: the intelligible world.

Words are embedded in the sensible realm and they cannot shake that taint. Nothing prevents someone from changing the conventional denotation of ‘curved’ or ‘straight’. Linguistic meaning is a matter of convention,<sup>58</sup> and every linguistic utterance is tied to a particular and changeable context. Even if the ideal philosopher successfully achieves contemplation of the intelligible realm, his attempt to put his perception in words must introduce the particular and the distortion that goes along with it. This is not to say that the philosopher can attain knowledge of the Forms without language. The give and take of logical discussion is essential in order to generate the moment of insight. But perception of the Forms must be unmediated by language.<sup>59</sup> Language is a sensible, conventional image, and it can only suggest the intelligible. What is true even of philosophical conversation is true of attempts to represent such conversation in writing. Not only can the meaning of ‘curved’ change, but the interpretation of any written work is similarly context-determined. Thus the critique of writing at the end of the *Phaedrus* is based upon the perception that a fixed written text cannot respond to a change in context.<sup>60</sup> As Frede remarks, it does no good to attempt to write down philosophical insight, since the understanding in question is not a matter of propositions alone, but of a way of life. The difficulties inherent in acquiring the knowledge that has as its object entities such as virtue, reality, and justice compels Plato to write dialogues. It also means that

<sup>58</sup> Konstan 1986 demonstrates how the variable meaning of words like *arete* and *sophia* is an issue in the *Protagoras*.

<sup>59</sup> Sayre 1988 argues not only that a careful reading of the *Seventh Letter* shows that all language is too much bound up with sensible imagery to express true philosophy; but that the *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, *Sophist* and *Theaetetus* provide good evidence that this assertion is valid in contexts other than those of the letter. Cf. Desjardins 1988: 111–12; R. S. Stewart 1989: 274–5. Gill 1992: 159–60 argues that the point of the *Seventh Letter* is not so much to stress the inadequacies of language as to ‘specify the conditions . . . under which philosophical understanding can “blaze out”’. He is correct that the object of the letter’s critique is written discourse, but this is not because dialectic conversation can adequately communicate the content of philosophical insight. Lively philosophical give-and-take and long study create the environment for insight. I do not see why Gill’s stress on the importance of the correct type of philosophical environment is incompatible with the view that language cannot fully express philosophical understanding.

<sup>60</sup> We may therefore agree with Rowe 1986a: 114 that the dialogues do not escape the critique of writing Sokrates formulates there.



we are not to put too much trust in the dialogues as an expression of Platonic doctrine; the status of the arguments contained therein remains uncertain.<sup>61</sup>

These three themes – the difficulty of attaining knowledge, the instability and context-bound nature of language (magnified when language is written down), and language's consequent incapacity to accurately represent knowledge – return us to our principal focus: the function of myth in Platonic dialogue. The *Phaedrus* tells us that no written discourse is worthy of much seriousness (277e). This includes both the dialogue and the myth contained therein. The critique cannot be escaped, but by encompassing it as part of his literary and philosophical strategy, Plato can hope to be unconvicted of methodological naïveté. The problematic status of language demands acknowledgement before any theoretically sophisticated linguistic project can be undertaken. This acknowledgement takes the form of repeated indications that we must look at our lives and conversations from a transcendental and divine perspective. We must realise that seriousness must be evaluated on a sliding scale. The serious play philosophers engage in is the highest human endeavour, but their arguments are provisional and we must continually re-evaluate them in light of changing contexts and the 'weakness of words'. Myth is clearly a game we play with language, but language itself is a game. It is not one we should be flippant about (like the sophists). If the status of the arguments is uncertain, and if the language used to express them is unstable, and if Plato writes philosophical myths that explicitly problematise their own philosophical and linguistic status, the problem of Platonic myth mirrors the problem of the Platonic dialogue.<sup>62</sup> Plato writes myths for precisely the same reason that he writes dialogues: to ward off certainty and keep the philosophical quest alive in terms that acknowledge its fragility. We should take them very seriously indeed.

<sup>61</sup> Frede 1992: *passim*, esp. 202, 214–17. Rowe 1996 prefers to stress that, despite the dialogue form, open-ended discussion is not really operative in the later dialogues, and in the *Statesman* in particular. Nevertheless, I suggest, the considerable amount of comment on philosophical procedure and on the provisionality of conclusions that we find in the dialogues mitigates against a doctrinal reading.

<sup>62</sup> Gill 1993: 52 has a useful formulation along similar lines: 'myths raise the question of the kind of falsehood (or fiction) involved in an attempt to put into words (in mythical or imagistic form) an understanding of the truth which is necessarily incomplete, because it reflects an uncompleted search for truth'. He explicitly rejects the possibility that *all* discourse must necessarily fail to achieve knowledge of objective truth (86), but I argue that it is not just a question of the falsehood involved in constructing imagistic pictures of the search for truth, but of the difficulty involved in putting an understanding of the truth into any words that will be stable.

## CHAPTER 7

### *Plato: myth and the soul*

This chapter examines the myths of the soul in the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*. The mythological material from the later dialogues, which focus more on methodological matters, will be treated in Chapter 8. This division reflects a shift of emphasis in the deployment of Platonic philosophical myth between the middle and late periods. The final word on the chronology of the Platonic dialogues has not been spoken, but, fortunately, absolute precision is unnecessary for the present task.<sup>1</sup> It is sufficient that the myths of the soul form a recognisable grouping reflecting primarily ethical concerns. Middle period myths give a synoptic view of reality. They are connected with philosophical intuition and with the unmediated perception of reality that is the goal of the philosophical quest. They do not reveal reality, but act as a model for this ultimate experience. The relationship between logical/analytic discourse and mythical/intuitive discourse is complex. ‘Myth’ describes both an insight which serves as a starting point for dialectic and one which comes at the end of the process of analysis. It is the discourse out of which dialectic emerges and in which dialectic ends when the object of its analysis cannot (as yet) be verified. Thus it can be regarded as a symbolic short-cut for the analytic process, although it can replace it.<sup>2</sup> Myth is the multivalent discourse against which philosophy revolts, the discourse which is a kind of philosophical shorthand, and the discourse which represents philosophy’s culmination.<sup>3</sup> As a reaction to philosophical insight, it is generated by and tied to discussion, but does not

<sup>1</sup> For a brief recent introduction to problems of chronology with bibliography, see Rutherford 1995: 3–7 with Appendix A, 35–6. Kahn 1996: 42–7 has valuable remarks on the dangers of confusing attribution to different periods by stylometric criteria with attribution on the basis of philosophical content.

<sup>2</sup> Several commentators observe that some Platonic myths achieve results which could also have been produced by logic: Frutiger 1930: 219; Elias 1984: 119. Cf. Moors 1982: 59.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson 1941: 69 notes that philosophical intuition in Plato is complementary, not opposite, to method.

express this insight analytically. Since myth disclaims factual correspondence with reality, it is ideal for the presentation of such an experience.

As we have seen, early philosophers rejected the poets' claims of special insight bestowed by the Muses since this insight had no rational basis. Conventional ways of thinking about the world and conventional language were to be displaced by discourse grounded in logic, although the potential for separating language from truth called even the philosophical project into question. The Socratic elenchus is well qualified to continue the process of deconstructing society's conventional beliefs. Sokrates refutes his interlocutor on the basis of the interlocutor's own common-sense beliefs, but is so reluctant to argue to or from his own moral beliefs that the New Academy can claim him as a sceptic.<sup>4</sup> Sokrates' myths of the soul thus have a special status as expressions of his own belief and philosophical intuition.<sup>5</sup> Yet this intuition (symbolised by his divine voice, the *daimonion*) is grounded in argument and is a result of a life of enquiry. If it were not so grounded, Sokrates would merely be a member of a belief-group along Pythagorean lines, taking the immortality of the soul as an article of faith and devoting itself to ethical purity.

Sokrates' beliefs cannot just be accepted as philosophical conventions, but must be earned by analysis and the dialectical ascent towards knowledge. The dialogues considered in this chapter show him grounding in reason the beliefs he expresses in myths. This is explicit in the *Phaedrus*, where the insight expressed in the myth of the charioteer provides the starting point and structure for the discussion of dialectic that follows, but it is foreshadowed in the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*. Just as the philosopher of the *Republic* must return to the cave to teach others after his vision of truth, Sokrates uses his philosophical intuition to stimulate the enquiry of others.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the idealised philosopher of the *Republic*, however, he does not have scientific knowledge, but an insight which, to put it in terms of the *Phaedrus*, is 'recollective'. Recollective insight replaces Muse-based inspiration, but unlike inspiration is not

<sup>4</sup> Annas 1992: 54–5.

<sup>5</sup> This view of philosophical insight and its relation to myth must be distinguished from a more romantic view of Platonic myth. J. A. Stewart [1905]/1960 contended that Platonic myth is an expression of Kant's 'transcendental feeling', a 'solemn sense of the overshadowing presence of "That which was, and is, and ever shall be" (57–8). 'The Myth', he says, 'bursts in upon the Dialogue with a revelation of something new and strange . . . the inrush of a vast experience, as from another world' and appeals to the non-articulate part of the soul (25, 44). The suggestion that philosophical myth appeals to the non-logical part of the soul goes too far. If the inrush of experience from the beyond were all that was involved, Plato's procedure would be identical to that of the many poets Stewart cites as illustrations of transcendental feeling (47–65). But Plato is everywhere concerned to distinguish his method from that of the poets. See also the objections of Elias 1984: 86. <sup>6</sup> Compare Sayre 1988: 106.

an end in itself. Sokrates believes that the soul is immortal, that nothing truly bad can happen to the soul of a good person. How does he know these things? He intuitively feels them. But this means that he cannot present them as knowledge until they have been established by argument. This is why, with typical irony, he can present his beliefs as something he has heard from someone else, not as his own invention. Any attempt to shorten the justification process leads to unsatisfactory analysis (as we shall see in the *Phaedo*).

Short examinations of the myths of judgement in the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* will be followed by a more lengthy consideration of the *Phaedrus*. Together, these myths provide us with a vision of the destiny of the soul and point us towards a life of philosophy that embodies conscious self-knowledge. In the first three dialogues, a myth about the soul brings the discussion to a close, but does not mark the first intrusion of mythological material into the argument. These dialogues (*Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*) manifest a self-conscious shifting of mode between discursive levels that are more or less 'mythological'. Not only is the truth status of myth qualified, but different types of argumentation receive similar qualification according to their context and reception. In all three, early forays into mythological material mark a possible breakdown in analytic progress. Myth can only be philosophically integrated when argumentation has received its due. It has a triple function. First, it compensates for contextual difficulties (the imminence of Sokrates' death, the intransigence of an interlocutor, the difficulty of understanding the soul while it is immured in flesh). Second, its intrusion into the dialogues demands that we be aware of the status of the arguments we use, and how that status is affected by contextual difficulties. Third, it emphasises the provisional nature of the conclusions reached during discussion.

#### THE GORGIAS

The problem of the status of speech is a recurrent theme in the *Gorgias*. In Chapter 6, we considered the role played by assertions of playfulness and seriousness. The introduction to the eschatological myth, called *logos* by Sokrates and *mythos* by Kallikles, questions the status not only of the myth but of all Sokrates' arguments. For Kallikles, both myth and argument are child's play and old wives' tales: in a word, *mythos*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> So also Smith 1985: 26.

Conversely, Sokrates' position must be characterised as *logos* because eschatology and argument are all of a piece. The issue of the correct application of *mythos* and *logos* terminology recalls earlier skirmishing on the non-duplicitous use of language. Kallikles and Sokrates spar about the level at which they should read each other's utterances and have difficulty in interpreting each other. Kallikles accuses Sokrates of verbal villainy (483a2–3) because Sokrates 'hunts after names', and if anybody trips up in their use of a word (ῥήματι ἀμάρτη), he fastens on to it like a godsend (489bc). Sokrates turns the accusation: Kallikles speaks empty words that reveal nothing (489e6–7). He himself is not trying to catch Kallikles out with a word (οὐ ῥήματι θηρεύω, 490a4–5);<sup>8</sup> it is Kallikles who is inconsistent (491b7–8). This run of accusations occurs shortly before the introduction of the first sustained treatment of mythological material in the dialogue, the speculation concerning the soul in Hades (492e–494a).<sup>9</sup> Methodological warfare thus culminates in a sudden change of metaphysical perspective.

Who knows, asks Sokrates (following Euripides), if life is really death, and death life (492e7–11)? He has heard from a wise man that we are dead now and our body is our tomb (493a1–3). Sokrates inverts our normal conceptions and justifies Kallikles' earlier remark that Sokrates' views turn our lives upside down (481c3–4). He then adduces the story told by 'a subtle and mythologising (μυθολογῶν) man' (493a5), who compared the appetitive part of our soul to a 'jar' (πίθον) because of its 'plausible and persuasive' character (τὸ πιθανόν τε καὶ πειστικόν, 493a6–7).<sup>10</sup> In Hades, the foolish, those with unrestrained appetites, carry water to a leaky jar in a sieve. Thus their souls can never hold anything; they are untrustworthy and forgetful. The subtle mythologiser has much in common with Sokrates. Sokrates says that he 'misled by means of a name' (493a6).<sup>11</sup> Kallikles has accused Sokrates of doing the same thing to further his own ethical agenda. The moral of the myth, that insatiate appetites cause misery, is also part of Sokrates' agenda. When Kallikles urges Sokrates to abandon childish philosophical 'subtleties' (κομπῶς, 486c6), he uses the same adjective as Sokrates did in characterising the mythologising man.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Whether by Sokrates' own form of expression or by taking Kallikles too literally (Dodds 1959: 288).

<sup>9</sup> Their mutual incomprehension was earlier compared by Kallikles to the antipathy of the brothers Amphion and Zethos in the *Antiope* of Euripides. For the implications of the comparison see Nightingale 1995: 69–92.

<sup>10</sup> On the troubled interpretation of this phrase, and for the use of the allegory of the water carriers in Hades, see Blank 1991. <sup>11</sup> Blank 1991: 25–6.

<sup>12</sup> At the end of the dialogue, by contrast, the 'subtleties' are the practices suggested by Kallikles to Sokrates that will save him should he ever be accused in a law-court (521e1–2).

The emphasis on verbal and intellectual subtlety is consistent with the tone of the prior discussion. Neither philosophical nor mythological subtleties are effective; Kallikles refuses to recognise any perspective other than his own. This early attempt at mythological protreptic lives down to Kallikles' expectations, as Sokrates realises when he asks the self-deprecating and ironic question 'Do I persuade you . . . or will you not change your mind even if I tell you many other such *mythoi*?' (493d1–3). The punning on the appetitive part of the soul (a verbal subtlety), described variously as persuadable or as plausible and persuasive, reflects differing perceptions of the function of the appetites.<sup>13</sup> Myth and pun emphasise the problem of point of view in any discussion of the correct use of language and discursive categories. The Socratic and Kalliklean perspectives invert each other on a linguistic, ethical, and narrative level. Small wonder that they eventually assign the same narrative to (supposedly) opposed speech genres.

Set where it is, the myth of the water carriers is ineffective. Its abrupt introduction shows that it is more a rhetorical gambit than a part of the argument. Sokrates has not yet refuted Kallikles' vision of the good life. The refutation has two parts: first, the mythological allusion and concomitant allegory, and second, a series of systematic arguments. Only the second part is effective.<sup>14</sup> As will be the case in the *Phaedo*, the preliminary introduction of mythological material about the fate of the soul is unsuccessful because Sokrates has not yet established his position through argument. But although Sokrates earns the right to tell a myth at the end of the dialogue by refuting Kallikles' vision, he still cannot convince. This is because Kallikles is incapable of distinguishing argument from protreptic *logos* from *mythos*. When Kallikles attempts to end the discussion in the middle, Sokrates responds that one should not even leave *mythoi* in mid-narrative; they should complete their discussion so that their *logos* can have a 'head' (505cd). Kallikles is unmoved and continues only at Gorgias' request. This brief reference to *mythos* and *logos* anticipates the confrontation in the introduction to the final myth. Kallikles cares nothing for the integrity of the argument and Sokrates must appeal to him on narrative grounds. Yet by making such an appeal, Sokrates acknowledges that the discussion is no more than a story for Kallikles. The latter shows as little respect for narrative as he has for intellectual consist-

<sup>13</sup> Blank 1991: 26–7.

<sup>14</sup> Kahn 1983: 102–4, noting that the myth of the water carriers anticipates the concluding myth of judgement.

ency; he never tells the same story and does not care if a narrative is finished or not.

By 508d, Sokrates thinks he has constructed a good case. His contention that it is more shameful to do than to suffer wrong has been established and is 'held down and bound by arguments of iron and adamant' (508e6–509a2). Kallikles admits: 'In some way you seem to me to speak well, Sokrates, but I experience what most people do, I don't entirely believe you' (513c4–6). This is as close as Kallikles comes to conceding to Sokrates' logic. The force of the argument convinces, but does not satisfy Kallikles' emotional needs. Concession (with reservations) to the argument occurs also in the *Phaedo* immediately prior to the introduction of the myth. Here, as there, Sokrates responds that repeated and better discussion will help. His next argument, that one should not flatter the Athenians even if it leads to prosecution, leads into the myth. Anybody with reason, he says, fears injustice more than death, since it is the utmost of evils to arrive in Hades with an unjust soul (522e1–4). He then tells Kallikles an illustrative *logos*. The judgement of the soul and its assignment to a post-mortem fate used to take place while people were still alive. The judges used to be impressed by clothes and other external paraphernalia. Consequently, people were sent to the wrong places after death, for evil souls could hide the fact. Zeus' solution was that the soul should be judged naked (523a3–524a7). Sokrates vouches for the story: 'These are the things, Kallikles, that I have heard and believe to be true' (524a8–b1).

A second section gives us Sokrates' inferences. Death is a separation of soul and body, each of which keeps the disposition it had in life (524b2–6). After judgement, the soul gains requital for its deeds during life. The scarred souls of oriental tyrants and the like suffer either correctional or paradigmatic punishment. Those that have lived pious lives, especially philosophers, are sent to the Isles of the Blest (526c1–5). Sokrates concludes that he is persuaded by these stories (526d3–4) and exhorts his audience to pursue the truth and gain their reward. He then returns to the question of the utility of myth:

Now perhaps you think that these things are a *mythos*, like an old wives' tale, and you despise them. And such contempt would not be at all surprising if we could somehow search out and discover better and truer things. (527a5–8)

But they cannot. None of his interlocutors has been able to demonstrate that we should live any life other than the one which will profit us in the afterlife. The only unrefuted *logos* is that doing an injustice should be

avoided more than suffering one (527b1–5). Sokrates encourages Kallikles to be persuaded by him and to learn the moral of the story (*logos*) (527c4–6), and ends the dialogue by repeating this message: they must use the story as their guide (527e1–2).

Approval of the myth is contingent on not finding anything better to say. At the same time, the myth is identified with the result of the previous argument, that nobody has proved that one should live any life other than the virtuous one which will benefit them in the afterlife. The connection is a little troubling.<sup>15</sup> Yet, unlike the earlier myth of the water carriers, Sokrates has established his case *before* he moves into the realm of *mythos*. Even within the mythological account, Sokrates represents his construction of the myth as a function of logical inference (λογίζομαι, 524b1). To be sure, the inference is from traditional tales, but the conclusion that he draws, that death is the separation of the soul from the body, is not grossly fantastic, and serves as a basis for philosophical argument in the *Phaedo*. Sokrates has earned the right to mythologise by the rigour of his arguments. He believes in his eschatological myth partly as an item of faith, and partly as a result of logical and emotional inference. Characteristically, he does not insist on the precision of his account; his description of death narrates ‘some such thing as this’ (524b1). Sokrates’ defensive attitude towards the myth results from the hostility of his interlocutor.

In a dialogue that has much to say about rhetoric, myth is a rhetorical weapon, a statement of faith, and a challenge to think through the language with which we express our convictions. Both Sokrates and Kallikles accuse each other of playing with words. The only way to avoid such a charge and create the clarity necessary for any discussion is to be as specific as possible about the level at which one intends one’s words to be taken. The juxtaposition of *mythos* and *logos* in both passages where mythological material is deployed is a first step towards the creation of such self-consciousness. The connection between the content of the myth and the argument sketches a project that will be fulfilled in the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*. Given the lack of a proof for the immortality of the soul in the *Gorgias*, the project cannot be completed there. Sokrates may think that his eschatological *mythos* is a ‘truth of religion’, but this is not why he calls it a *logos*.<sup>16</sup> He does this because he views it as an extension of his philosophical *logos*,<sup>17</sup> and because doing so dramatises the incompatibility of his views of language, logic, and ethics with those of Kallikles.

<sup>15</sup> Irwin 1979: 248.

<sup>16</sup> Contra Dodds 1959: 377.

<sup>17</sup> Friedländer [1954]/1958: 189.



## THE PHAEDO

Like the *Gorgias*, the *Phaedo* thematises the status of philosophical discussion and the type of speech that should express it. The integrity of the discussion is a major concern, but now it is threatened by death rather than by a hostile interlocutor. The argumentation and mythologising is coloured by the imminence of Sokrates' execution. When the sun goes down, Sokrates will drink hemlock and meet the gods whose servant he has proclaimed himself to be. The failure of the argument would deprive the interlocutors of reasoned hope for Sokrates' survival and render their parting even more painful. The prison guard believes that Sokrates should abstain from philosophical discussion because it may interfere with the action of the poison (63de). Simmias and Kebes are afraid at one point that objection to Sokrates' argument will cause him distress (84d). Sokrates is adamant in the face of these concerns; the integrity of the discussion is paramount. Yet the beginning of the dialogue problematises the linguistic means Sokrates has used to express his philosophical devotion, and the subsequent conversation juxtaposes hypotheses about the afterlife that do not share the same argumentative status. As in the *Gorgias*, premature recourse to myth causes problems. Sokrates begins the dialogue with an oversimplified distinction between *mythos* and *logos*, and moves on to a preliminary myth that combines elements from Aesop with a doctrine of transmigration. When this fails to satisfy his interlocutors, he moves on to a more rigorous, although still provisional, argument. This is more successful and justifies the final myth. Even so, the results are subject to future revision. Studying the *Phaedo* as it weaves back and forth between myth and argument is an exercise in determining the boundaries of Platonic *mythos*.

As the conversation opens, Sokrates, released from his chains, constructs in outline an Aesop-like *mythos* (60c2) on the mutual dependence of pleasure and pain. This proto-*mythos* leads to a discussion of Sokrates' literary efforts in prison. His friends ask why he has composed a prelude to Apollo and put Aesop's fables into verse (60cd). The solution is that Sokrates has been attempting to fulfil a command to make music given to him in a recurring dream (60e6–7). He had previously thought that philosophy was the highest music, but after the trial he decided to hedge his bets by composing conventional music (poetry). The task of the poet is to compose *mythoi*, not *logoi*, and since Sokrates does not consider himself a mythologist (μυθολογικός), he turned the *mythoi* of Aesop into poetry (61b3–7).<sup>18</sup> We should note the opposition of *mythos* and *logos*,

poetry and philosophy. Sokrates does not mythologise himself, but uses Aesop's material. Aesop's *mythoi* explore the similarities between men and animals.

This resonates in a Platonic context for two reasons. First, much ethical discussion in the dialogues centres on the extent to which human beings should indulge their bestial elements (as, for example, in the description of the appetitive part of the soul at *Resp.* 571c5 as 'beastlike', and Sokrates' question in the *Phaedrus* about the extent to which he is a 'beast' like Typhon (230a3)). The Aesopic animal fable is well suited to express Socratic ethical concerns.<sup>19</sup> Second, after the *Phaedo*'s first three formal arguments for the immortality of the soul (the arguments from opposites, from recollection, and from affinity with the Forms), Sokrates resumes his earlier discussion of the fate of the soul after death as the first half of the dialogue comes to a close. The soul of the philosopher is easily purified of the body and joins the gods. The souls of the impure wander until reincarnated, some as donkeys, some as wolves and hawks (81b–82a). Those that have pursued virtue as a matter of habit rather than conviction will be reincarnated into an orderly animal society, one of bees or wasps or ants (82b). Sokrates' attraction to Aesop's animal fables foreshadows the suggestion of transmigration into animals and suggests a way in which the Aesopic material may reveal a deeper truth.

Yet in spite of Sokrates' disclaimers, *mythos* and *logos* interpenetrate in the first half of the *Phaedo*, and not just because Sokrates has been versifying Aesop. At two points early in the dialogue Sokrates introduces material not on his own authority, but on that of others. As he reviews the wickedness of suicide, Sokrates emphasises that he is only repeating what he has heard from others (61d9). Later, as he prepares to make the first argument for the immortality of the soul, he speaks of an 'ancient tale' (70c5–6) that souls move back and forth between this world and the other. Such ascription of narrative material to other sources is characteristic of Platonic myth. The arguments that follow these two introductions are not myths, but they are associated with such material. The wording reinforces this point. First, the argument against suicide. Sokrates thinks it an appropriate topic for discussion, given the situation: 'It

<sup>18</sup> We might remember also that Aesop was lynched by a mob of outraged Delphians who disliked his particular way of interacting with their community (*Vita G*, *Vita W* 132–42. Note βλάσφημον καὶ ὀλοζόνα at 132). The story of the death of Aesop at the hands of the Delphians was current in the fifth century (Herodotos 2.134, cf. the scholion on Aristophanes' *Wasps* 1446). A prototype for Sokrates perhaps? So Compton 1990: 338–42.

<sup>19</sup> The fables seem to have been popular in the late fifth century, to judge by Aristophanes (*Birds* 471, 651–3; *Wasps* 566, 1256–61, 1446–8). Dunbar 1995: 325–6.

is most fitting for someone who is about to make the journey [to the other world] to examine and *mythologise* (διασκοπεῖν τε καὶ μυθολογεῖν) about it, and say what kind of place we think it is' (61e1–3).<sup>20</sup> The combination of the vocabulary of rational scrutiny with that of mythologising is startling; as Rowe notes, it is a 'virtual oxymoron'.<sup>21</sup> It is also symptomatic of the uncertain boundary between the two.

A similar combination occurs in the aftermath of Sokrates' speech in defence of the proposition that it is not unreasonable to view death with tranquillity, given that one will meet with 'good masters and companions' there (69d7–e4). Kebes objects that most people do not believe in the immortality of the soul. To do so requires 'not a little encouragement and proof' (παράμυθίας δεῖται καὶ πίστεως, 70b2–3). We have already seen that *paramythia* represents both the tone that is constitutive of philosophical discussion and the encouragement directed towards the non-philosophical. This dual nature reflects two possibilities for the employment of myth, one philosophical and one non-philosophical. Are we to take the arguments for immortality that follow as exercises in consolation (*paramythia*) and faith (*pistis*) or as protreptic (*paramythia*) proofs (*pistis*)? The answer depends on the philosophical expertise of the audience. Sokrates proposes to discuss the question: 'Do you wish to discuss (διαμυθολογῶμεν) whether these things are likely or not?' (70b6–7). The word here blandly translated as 'discuss' is a compound form of the verb *mythologeo*, 'tell a *mythos*'. Its meaning here is disputed; once again we should adopt an interpretation that gives full weight to the paradoxical interpenetration of *mythos* and *logos*.<sup>22</sup> Mythologising is not confined to the 'official' myth at the end of the dialogue. It forms the coda to the immortality proofs of the first half (the doctrine of transmigration). We need not attribute to Sokrates the desire to spin imagin-

<sup>20</sup> As Rowe 1993: 125 notes, ἀποδημία can refer either to a journey or to the sojourn at the end of it. He opts for the latter, as does my translation; both meanings are operative here.

<sup>21</sup> Rowe 1993: 125 'The metaphor is not dead (as suggested e.g. by LSJ), and especially not in connection with a subject like the present one, which may only be describable in imaginative terms.' Compare also the collocation of 'dialogising' (διαλεχθεῖν) and mythologising (διαμυθολογεῖν) at *Ap.* 39e1–5.

<sup>22</sup> A weaker reading (Hackforth 1955: 58, n. 2) asserts that 'it is . . . scientific proof of immortality that our dialogue purports to give; it would therefore be inappropriate for Sokrates to suggest their having a μυθολογία in the sense of an imaginative discourse, though indeed we do get a myth at the end, when the 'proof' has been achieved . . . [T]he word means simply "discuss"'. This fails to distinguish between the arguments for the immortality of the soul and the suggestion of post-mortem judgement and transmigration. The former is (potentially) provable and the latter is not (cf. Burnet 1911: 61). Compare Dorter's (1982: 159) distinction between the proof of personal and impersonal immortality. For a different treatment of the mixture of investigation and mythologising in the *Phaedo*, see Burger 1984: 49 and *passim*.

ative tales about the immortality of the soul at the expense of logic.<sup>23</sup> We can say, however, that the vocabulary Plato gives him reflects an ambiguity about argumentative status.

This ambiguity recurs as Sokrates moves into the immortality proofs. Having offered to mythologise about immortality, Sokrates glosses this activity as rational enquiry. They must 'examine' the question well (διασκοπεῖσθαι, 70c3; note the coincidence of prefix with διαμυθολογῶμεν six lines earlier). If one were to accept the *logos* that souls move back and forth between this world and the other, it would be 'proof' (70d2) of the immortality of the soul, but if this is not clear, another *logos* is needed (70d4–5). The seeming equivalence of two different kinds of *logos* is notable. The *logos* of transmigration could be accepted as proof if it were 'self-evident' (70d3). Since it is not, different proof is in order, also described as *logos*.<sup>24</sup> Yet the rejection of a doctrine of transmigration as the basis of an immortality proof does not entail that an independent immortality proof will confirm transmigration. Transmigration may seem to be verified by the three arguments for immortality, but even aside from the soundness of these arguments, it is verification by juxtaposition. Transmigration is not a *logos* in the sense of 'argument'. Just as mythologising does not necessarily imply the telling of imaginative tales, the production of *logoi* does not betoken verifiability.

The account of transmigration that ends the first half of the dialogue has, then, more than a little similarity to a myth. If Simmias and Kebes had not brought up their objections, it might have occupied the position presently taken by the eschatological myth at the end. The meditative silence that follows indicates that a conclusion has been reached (even if prematurely). Nonetheless, the conclusion is unsatisfactory to Simmias and Kebes. The language Sokrates uses at this point resumes and corrects his remarks at the beginning of the dialogue. When he finds he must start again he compares himself to the swan, which sings most sweetly before it dies. This is not because of grief, but because of its joy at going to meet its god. Sokrates too is full of joy, and is a servant of the same god (Apollo) (84d–85b). Further philosophical discussion is therefore analogous to the prophetic swansong. He had wanted to make music all his life, had thought that the best music was philosophy, and had turned to an Apolline prelude and Aesopic myth in case he was wrong. He made a strong distinction between *mythoi* and *logoi*, and disclaimed talent in the former, but this distinction was oversimplified.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Rowe 1993: 153.

<sup>24</sup> Note the change to a factual from a potential protasis at 70d4–5.

<sup>25</sup> On the ambiguous characterisation of Sokrates and Aesop as mythologisers, see Dorter 1982: 6.

As Apollo's philosophical swan who sings that this life is a prelude to a disincarnate afterlife, and who speculates on transmigration into and out of animal bodies, he recomposes his prelude to Apollo and his Aesopic *mythoi* as the dialogue progresses.<sup>26</sup> On one level, this confirms his early contention that philosophy is the greatest music. Yet it also erases somewhat the distinction that he was concerned to draw. Simmias and Kebes are right to have doubts, and Sokrates was underestimating himself when he claimed not to be a mythologist.

The first part of the dialogue teaches us and Sokrates the necessity of being self-conscious about the types of argument we use, and the role we assign to belief. The moral is driven home by the use of *mythos*-vocabulary and the repeated intrusion of mythological material. The renewed discussion that follows the objections is concerned with philosophical methodology, and includes a consideration of 'misology' and the hypothetical method. Towards the end of the dialogue, immortality has been proven to most of the interlocutors' satisfaction. Kebes admits that he cannot doubt Sokrates' conclusions as presented (107a2–3). Simmias too acknowledges the cogency of Sokrates' discussion; he cannot disbelieve Sokrates' arguments (107a8–9), but still is 'compelled to disbelieve' (107b2) due to the 'greatness of the subject' and 'human weakness'. We should contrast Simmias' difficulties here with his earlier ones in 85. There, the argumentation was attacked by Simmias as insufficient, but whereas a similar reference to the difficulty of the subject matter was made as a concession (85c1–4), here it is transformed into an excuse for an overriding scepticism. Even arguments he thinks are valid cannot convince.

Sokrates' solution is twofold. First he stresses the need for even more rigorous argumentation. Even their (believable) hypotheses need further scrutiny. When this has been done sufficiently, they will have gone as far as a man can go (107b). This leaves us unsure whether clarity will succeed in expelling all doubts, or whether, as seems more likely, some uncertainty is endemic to the human condition. The discussion in the dialogue is only a first step and is not the best that could be done. Here, as elsewhere, Plato stresses that arguments need to be repeated and analysed many times before one has knowledge of the theorems involved.<sup>27</sup> As the *Seventh Letter* indicates, only long familiarity with a subject makes understanding blaze out. Until this happens, one is deprived of the emotional satisfaction that follows philosophical en-

<sup>26</sup> Burger 1984: 103 sees the *Phaedo* as an Apolline hymn of purification.

<sup>27</sup> See Blank 1986 for the relevance of *Phd.* 101d–e to this necessity.

lightenment. To compensate for this lack, Sokrates turns to the second aspect of his solution: the concluding myth. Like its earlier counterpart, it is tied to the preceding argumentation, but this time justifiably so. 'If the soul is indeed immortal' (107c2), neglecting it is dangerous, for the education and nurture of the soul are the only things one can take to the other world. These are said (λέγεται, 107d4) to help or harm it. The story of the soul in the other world is again prefaced by the words 'it is said' (λέγεται, 107d5). This account, then, is introduced by a conditional that marks it as a consequence of belief in immortality. If the soul is immortal, we must take the long view of its welfare, but the detailed content of this long view is a matter of report. Unlike the account of transmigration that followed the first three arguments for immortality, the narrative here is marked as a story and its logical connection to the argument is specified.

The story is divided into two unequal sections. In the first (107d5–108c5), Sokrates gives a simplified version of the judgement of souls and transmigration narrative that closed the first half of the dialogue (108a8). The emphasis here is on the ease or difficulty with which the soul reaches its appointed place. The tale is represented as a mixture of Socratic conjecture and pre-existing tradition: Sokrates says that he 'infers' (τεκμαιρόμενος) from rites practised here on earth that the path to the lower world is not simple (108a1–6). This resumptive material closes the ring that started with the objection of Simmias and Kebes. Now that immortality has been proved, Sokrates can restate the transmigration narrative. But this time there is a difference. Sokrates chooses to strike out in a different direction and expand upon the nature of the other world. Whereas the transmigration material extends the chronological scope of our knowledge of the soul, the description of the world changes our geographic perspective.<sup>28</sup> Sokrates has it on 'somebody's' authority that the world is not as people imagine (108c7–8). Nothing prevents him from simply narrating the shape of the earth according to his conviction, but to prove it true would be difficult indeed. He might not be able, and even if he were, his life will end before he can finish (108d4–e2).

Sokrates, then, does not claim his tale is true. He takes into account his own inability and the shortness of time.<sup>29</sup> This is, on the one hand, a concession to Simmias' strictures on human weakness and greatness of

<sup>28</sup> Nightingale forthcoming 1999.

<sup>29</sup> Compare Sokrates' demur as he describes the form of the soul in the *Phaedrus*: to tell what it is (246a) would require a divine and a long discourse, so he will use a comparison.

this kind of subject. Sokrates is now more cautious about the status he claims for his accounts. When he says his life is not sufficient for the length of the *logos* (108d8–9), his formulation is ambiguous. He refers primarily to the imminence of his execution, but, given that the arguments for immortality are provisional, and that the narration of the afterlife depends on them, it is fair to say that no human life is (or has yet been) sufficient to prove the truth of the narrative. Human weakness mitigates against it. Rigorous proof is thus abandoned in favour of a shorter and more rhetorical way, the presentation of Sokrates' personal conviction, which is, nevertheless, grounded in the best arguments he can manage. Sokrates' humility here contrasts with that of earlier poets. Homer's helplessness to sing all the details of the Trojan War without the help of the Muse is well known (e.g. *Il.* 2. 484–93).<sup>30</sup> Human capacity fails before the magnitude of events – and these are events in this world, not in a world beyond. Pindar sometimes cuts short his myths or catalogues with the excuse that time is too short, but he is sure to indicate that he could go on if he wanted to. For Sokrates in the *Phaedo*, myth acts as a shorter expression of a concept which may be too large to fit inside the confines of a discussion. When he finally breaks off, it is because of difficulty, not convenience (114c). Where Pindar proclaims his control over his subject matter, and Homer claims privileged access to information, Sokrates acknowledges his own subordination and humility in the face of the metaphysical. His philosophical Muses give him no guarantee of accuracy.

Sokrates' account is a product of conviction.<sup>31</sup> He believes that the earth is vast and we live in a hollow of a larger earth. Real heaven and real light exist in an upper region we do not attain in this life. The things in this upper region are far more beautiful than those that exist here (109a9–110a8). Here Sokrates makes a break: 'For if it is in fact right to tell a *mythos*, it is worth hearing the sort of things which exist on the surface of the earth and under heaven' (110b1–2). An elaborate account of these wonders follows: the trees, flowers, fruits, and gems of the upper world are all superior to what we know. Men also live up there, a life characteristic of the Hesiodic Golden Age (111a–c).<sup>32</sup> Sokrates then moves on to describe the underworld and begins to direct the myth back

<sup>30</sup> Ford 1992: 72–82. See especially 82 for the deployment of this topos in Plato's *Euthydemus*.

<sup>31</sup> I find attractive the suggestion of Sedley 1989: 359–83 that the details about the earth given in the myth are a response to Sokrates' earlier demand for a teleological explanation of the world: another example of the interpenetration of myth and argument.

<sup>32</sup> A pun on the Hesiodic δαίμονες . . . ἐπιχθόνιοι (*Op.* 122–3).<sup>2</sup>

towards the fate of the soul and the transmigration narrative (111d–112e). Those who have lived lives of indifferent virtue head to Acheron. The incurable are thrown into Tartaros. Sinners who are curable yet egregious stay in Tartaros until forgiven by those they have wronged (113d–114b). Souls who have lived a virtuous life pass to the blessed existence of the upper regions, while those who have philosophised are freed from their bodies altogether and pass to places even more beautiful. It is not easy to describe these places and the present time is insufficient to do so (114b–c).

Here the myth ends. It is followed by another characteristic statement of principle:

It is inappropriate for a sensible man to insist that these matters are exactly as I have narrated them. Nevertheless, that either these things or things of this sort are the case with regard to our souls and their habitations, since, indeed, the soul is evidently immortal – this, it seems to me, is a fitting thing, and is a risk worth taking for someone who believes that this is so. The risk is a noble one. We ought to chant these things like incantations to ourselves. This is, in fact, the reason I have been extending the myth for so long. (114d1–7)

This declaration is similar to the one made at the beginning of the description of the upper world, but is more positive. There is the same insistence that the account is not exact, but he adds that a person should sing these stories to himself like a charm. The theme of rationality is again present. A man who has sense will not believe in the exact truth of the myth but will take it as an indication of the truth. Moreover, the belief in the truth-like nature of the myth is not based on wishful thinking, but on reasoned argument.<sup>33</sup> We believe the myth because the soul *is evidently immortal* (as the previous arguments have shown). Contrast this with the formulation at the beginning of the myth, where Sokrates starts his narration as part of a conditional construction: ‘if indeed the soul is immortal’ (107c2). Conditional terminology has been changed to causal by the force of mythological ‘incantation’.<sup>34</sup> The epistemological groundwork has not changed, but the human fallibility that worried Simmias and Sokrates has been soothed, and the emphasis has shifted from the provisional nature of the arguments for immortality to the provisional nature of the details of the afterlife. Sokrates has thus found an appropriate context for the performance of myth which is worth the inherent risk of myth-making. The risk is that the listener might think

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Rowe 1993: 290.

<sup>34</sup> Dorter 1982: 165 translates 114d4 ‘if indeed the soul appears to be immortal’ and interprets differently.



the suggestive nature of myth can replace dialectic, thus the insistence that argument for the immortality of the soul must precede the formulation of the myth. The nobility of the risk (114d6) corresponds to the greatness of the prize, the welfare of the soul (114c8).

Once intellectual conviction is present (as far as possible for humans), one can tell myths, understanding that they are only representative images. One can also take advantage of their emotional force, and this explains the narrative elaboration of the myth. Instead of being told merely that each soul goes to a fitting place we receive a detailed account of the blessings of the saints and the tortures of the damned, designed to make our anticipation of the next world more concrete. Sokrates uses all the charms of narrative to draw us into the myth. He invitingly refers to an account of the nature of the earth that he has heard from 'someone' (108c8), and holds out something 'worth hearing' (110b1). His reason becomes clear when one remembers that the speech is primarily addressed to Simmias. Simmias had conceded the logic of the immortality arguments, but was dissatisfied. Sokrates' departure into myth followed immediately his instruction to Simmias to rework the logic from the beginning to make sure of it, but logic does not always provide emotional satisfaction for a philosopher who is aware of human limitation. What is left after we have done all we can with our minds? We need to provide ourselves with a discourse that acknowledges our limitations while providing emotional satisfaction. Such is Platonic myth, which proclaims its origins in rationality but confesses its own insufficiency as a complete account and thus becomes paradigmatic for human discourse in general. The human frailty which makes us uncertain of the results of logic suits us admirably for myth.

The confused interpenetration of *mythos* and *logos* in the first half of the dialogue gives way to more self-conscious mingling as the dialogue ends. The first transmigration narrative was not labelled *mythos*. This, as I discussed in Chapter 6, is not inherently significant since the presence of the word is not diagnostic. It is more interesting that Sokrates does not use the word *mythos* to describe his final narrative until 110b1 ('If it is in fact a good thing to tell a *mythos* . . .').<sup>35</sup> It is not possible to separate 'mythical' from 'non-mythical' sections of the narrative by content; it is all 'myth'. Both before and after the explicit introduction of *mythos* there is material on the judgement and fate of souls and on the nature of the world. What distinguishes the final section of the narrative is its narrative elaboration.

<sup>35</sup> Hackforth 1955: 175 (he considers 109b–110a as something between *logos* and *mythos*); cf. Rowe 1993: 275; Dorter 1982: 165.

This is one reason for Sokrates' concluding comment that he has 'lengthened' the *mythos*. The idea that a *mythos* has a life of its own and demands a full narrative treatment will recur. The close relationship between *mythos* and *logos* in the dialogue indicates that the subject of discussion is one which lends itself to mythological treatment. Such discussion must be monitored with particular care in order to distinguish blind from reasoned faith. Even if interpenetration is inescapable because of the weakness of human intellect, one must be self-conscious about it. Narrative awareness is a virtue with philosophical implications.

Sokrates implies that he spins out the myth for the sake of its emotional force. The risk of such a charm becomes apparent when Sokrates laughingly remarks that he has not persuaded Crito (115c6), who cannot believe that Sokrates is on his way to a better place. All his argumentation has been in vain (115d5); he seems to have spoken only as a consolation (παράμυθούμενος, 115d5–6). Crito's disbelief acts as a pendant to Simmias' worries. Whereas Simmias followed and accepted the arguments but kept his intellectual reserve, the entire conversation was above Crito's head. Sokrates chides him that not speaking well is 'discordant' and harms the soul (115e5–7). His insistence on correct speech and its relationship with psychic harmony underlines the importance of narrative awareness and reminds us that Sokrates is a philosophical music-maker. If, however, one does not found myth on a logical basis that is accepted by the interlocutor, it becomes a mere story; for those who do not understand it, logic itself is a myth. We are reminded here of Kallikles. In the *Gorgias* and *Phaedo*, myths of the afterlife remind us that we should think of the soul from an expanded perspective. Because they encompass both the incarnate and the disincarnate state, the sensible and the intelligible realm, their inclusion in the dialogues dramatises on a narrative and philosophical level the difficulties of moving between these realms. These myths are not a precise rendering of the truth, but are likely images arising from argument. But because the philosophical hypotheses examined in the dialogues are provisional and do not express certain knowledge, the epistemological status of *mythos* is an analogue for the status of philosophical *logos*. Hence the difficulty and necessity of distinguishing between the two.

#### THE REPUBLIC

The *Republic* is the culmination of the developments we have been examining. A full examination of the deployment of *mythos* and related

categories in the dialogue cannot be attempted here, and I shall focus mainly on the problematic integration of the Myth of Er into the argument. The *Republic* includes Plato's most sustained critique of poetic mythological culture. Sokrates banishes immoral tales from his utopia, and specifies an approved educational use of myth and poetry. Yet for the purposes of philosophical methodology, there is another banishment of even greater interest. The main argument of the dialogue seeks to establish that justice is desirable in itself, without any reference to post-mortem rewards or punishments. Myths of divine judgement are therefore banished from the body of the *Republic*. Just as the rulers of the ideal city will allow the poets to return from exile if it can be proved that poetry is beneficial, so myths of the afterlife are only admitted to the dialogue after they have been justified by the argument. Investigation will show that myth is owed to the argument. The fate of the soul in the afterlife is dismissed in order to allow for clarity of argumentation, but this does not mean that it is irrelevant to the analysis or an uncomfortable consequentialist addendum.

The Myth of Gyges' ring (359c–360b) is responsible for this banishment of eschatological myth.<sup>36</sup> This ring of invisibility, which allows Gyges the Lydian shepherd to commit injustice with impunity, clarifies the issues that will be the basis for discussion. Is justice desirable in itself or for its rewards? If one could commit injustice with impunity in this world, and believe the contradictory tales of the poets (who declare that the gods punish injustice but can be won over by prayers and purifications), why should one not do one's worst? The demand that Sokrates show justice to be desirable for its own sake means that he will not be allowed to deploy the fear of post-mortem divine judgement mentioned by Kephalos (330d7–e1). The myth of Gyges also motivates Sokrates' criticism of the tales of the poets since it is precisely the kind of immoral tale that Sokrates will ban from his state.<sup>37</sup> Before reintroducing *mythos* to the dialogue, Sokrates must clear conventional mythology out of the way and provide a mechanism to put such discourse in its proper place. If it is to reflect the truth about justice and the soul, myth must follow from philosophical arguments on these topics.

Sensitivity to the analytic power and to the narrative status of any given discourse characterises the discussion throughout. I remarked in the last chapter that Sokrates compares the process of constructing his utopia to telling a *mythos* (501e4); he realises that he is creating an ideal

<sup>36</sup> For thematic implications, see Moors 1988: 230–3.

<sup>37</sup> Moors 1988: 233.

paradigm that may never exist on earth (592b2). It is in the complex of sun, line, and cave, however, that we are given clearest guidance about the state of human knowledge (506d–518b). The passage arises from a request for an account of the Good. Sokrates doubts his capacity and is afraid that he may seem a laughing-stock (506d6–8). They must leave on one side the account of the Good as it is; it is more than they can reach on their present impulse. Sokrates does, however, offer to give an account of the ‘offspring’ of the Good that is very similar to it, that is, the sun (506d7–e5). In the absence of knowledge, the ascent to the Good is described through metaphor and analogy. After elaborating the analogy between the sun as the source of light and the Good as that which gives truth to the objects of knowledge and the ability to know to the knower, Sokrates sets up the image of the divided line to explain the proportional relationships between sensibles and intelligibles, knowledge and opinion. He then elaborates the famous allegory of the cave in order to model the ascent of the soul from perception of sensibles to knowledge of the Good. This philosophical ascent is compared to the experience of a prisoner immobilised in a cave and forced to watch a shadow-play. The prisoner is freed and is forced to leave the cave and look at the objects of the natural world and finally at the sun.

Sokrates characterises the whole account as ‘what appears to me’ (φαίνόμενα, 517b8), and comments ‘god knows if it is true’ (517b6–7). The impulse that leads Sokrates to create an analogy between the sun and the Good, between the ascent from the cave and ascent from the sensible realm, is the one behind the creation of philosophical myth, even though the complex of sun, line, and cave is not itself a myth (myths on the non-sensible world having been ruled out of court).<sup>38</sup> The philosopher’s aim is to reach the intelligible moving from idea to idea, without the aid of sensible images (511c). But neither Sokrates nor his interlocutors are in a position to do this.<sup>39</sup> They look at justice in the soul by comparing it with justice in the city (even if it is an ideal city), a sensible image. They mythologise ‘in discourse’ (501e4), using sensible language that is itself, as we have seen, an image. The difficulty of attaining knowledge, and of expressing the intelligible through the sensible informs the entire analogical complex. The complex specifies

<sup>38</sup> Frutiger 1930: 101–5; the cave is an allegory rather than a myth because it is immobile and depicts a state rather than an action. See, however, the comments of Annas 1981: 252–8. Elias 1984: 198 ff. considers the entire complex of sun, line, and cave to be a methodological myth, but this is because he views the ascent to the intelligible realm through dialectic in the fourth part of the line to be impossible and therefore mythical.

<sup>39</sup> Ferber 1992: 144–5.

what would be needed to get knowledge, and illustrates through images the difficulty of the task. Similarly, Platonic myth of the middle period communicates a vision of the ends of philosophy and reminds us how context-bound that vision is, how far from being achieved. Nevertheless, the divided line teaches us that there is a proportional relationship between sensible and intelligible, *mythos* and *logos*. A good philosopher will keep the proportions right.

The language with which Sokrates introduces his account of the sun is worth noting. Plato engages in elaborate financial punning: a metaphor of credit, interest, and principal provides us with a valuable framework for understanding how the myth at the end of the dialogue is integrated into the whole, and ties the myth to the sun, line, and cave analogy. The sun is an 'offspring' of the Good. Glaukon allows Sokrates to make his comparison on the condition that Sokrates will pay them back (ἀποτείσεις, 506e6) on some other occasion with a narrative about the 'father'. Sokrates, in return, wishes that he were able to pay back (ἀποδοῦναι) the debt immediately and have them collect (κομίσασθαι), rather than only paying them interest (τόκους). The sun is both 'interest' and 'offspring' (τόκον τε καὶ ἔκγονον). They should take care, however, that his payment is not 'counterfeit' (κίβδηλον ἀποδιδούς τὸν λόγον τοῦ τόκου, 507a5). One might talk of Sokrates' 'credit' here. His interlocutors are willing to make him an intellectual loan because they think him worthy of trust (the Greek word *pistis* has a wide semantic range: trust, assurance, proof, pledge, and (sometimes) credit-worthiness).<sup>40</sup> Even more important than pursuing the pun, however, is to note that interest implies principal. The imagistic account that Sokrates gives of the Good presupposes a non-imagistic account. Sokrates, however, is not sure if he is can pay back the principal. An analogical account is seen as interest on a philosophical debt. Interest remains problematic as long as we are unsure of the nature of the debt. Sokrates, in fact, does not approve of interest-loans, as we learn later in the dialogue (555e). His current payment is an act of magnanimity, but the theme of intellectual indebtedness is especially relevant in a dialogue which begins with an examination of the thesis that justice is paying what one owes.<sup>41</sup>

With the Myth of Er Sokrates returns to myth that problematises its own relationship with the surrounding argument. It resembles the myths of the *Phaedrus* and *Phaedo* in following argumentation for the

<sup>40</sup> Millett 1991: 7.

<sup>41</sup> Millett 1991: 6, 42–4.

immortality of the soul. As with the *Phaedo*, the myth is represented as flowing seamlessly from the preceding discussion. This discussion demands the myth in two ways: as a culmination of the arguments about justice and as a completion of Sokrates' treatment of poetry. The recurrence of the financial metaphor described above stresses that the myth is owed to the argument. The discussion of poetry which began Book 10 proved that poetry appeals to the baser parts of the soul, thus threatening psychic harmony. By 608b Sokrates has secured agreement, but he is unwilling to let the matter drop since he has not yet mentioned the greatest rewards of virtue. He then drops a conversational bomb. The discussion so far has concerned only the span of one human life, but what reward could rightly be called great when it deals only with the short period from childhood to old age? (608c5–7). An immortal thing ought not to take such a short period seriously, but should rather think on the scale of eternity (608c9–d1). Has Glaukon never perceived that the soul is immortal? (608d3–4). Glaukon responds with amazement, and Sokrates gives an immortality proof (608d–611b).

This introduction to the proof uses the themes of seriousness and old age/childhood to change the discussion's point of view. These themes are, as we have seen, closely associated with the introduction of myth and with the transcendental perspective that a philosopher will take towards her present life. We must not be prejudiced by our mortal context. Sokrates' remarks after the proof confirm this. We can say *that* the soul is immortal, but it is difficult to say 'what sort of thing it is in truth' (611b10). We can see the soul only when contaminated by connection with the body and the evils of this life. If the soul were to shed this connection, then we could see what it is really like (611b9–612a5). The benefit of virtue for the immortal soul is not clearly defined; we can only look to what it might become (οἷα ἂν γένοιτο, 611e3). The enumeration of the benefits of virtue seems to break down here. Fleshly corruption means that our access to knowledge is blocked. We do not even know if the soul is simple or composite (612a3–5), so how can we picture it in its immortality? Even to picture it in its corrupted state requires the image of the fishy god Glaukos, maimed by the ceaseless action of the sea and encrusted with barnacles (611cd). Where knowledge breaks down, so must language. Nevertheless, Sokrates has at least covered the forms of the soul in this life (612a5–6) and has fulfilled the demands of the argument, which specified that he could not have recourse to the external rewards and punishments of virtue as reported by Hesiod and

Homer. The soul should be just whether or not it has the ring of Gyges (612a8–b5).

The mention of Gyges closes a narrative ring whose content was the body of the *Republic*. The myth of Gyges caused the banishment of external and post-mortem rewards for virtue. Although we seem to have come to a stopping-point, Sokrates can now demand a return to external rewards. He does so in language that recalls the extended pun on intellectual indebtedness that introduced sun, line, and cave. They have ‘redeemed the other things’ (τά τε ἄλλα ἀπελυσάμεθα), and have not used the ‘wages’ (μισθοῦς) of virtue as part of the argument (612a8–b1). The Greek here is open to interpretation. Jowett and Campbell translate ‘we have cleared away in the argument the difficulties raised by Glaukon and Adeimantus’ and most commentators follow them.<sup>42</sup> I would, however, argue that the sense of ‘redeem’ is also present, based on the presence of other vocabulary of borrowing and repayment. Sokrates asks whether it is acceptable to ‘give back’ (ἀποδοῦναι, 612c1) to justice its wages, and asks his interlocutors to give back (that is, repay) what they borrowed in the argument (Ἄρ’ οὖν ἀποδώσετέ μοι ἃ ἔδανείσασθε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ; 612c5). They had asked, for the sake of the argument, that the just man seem unjust, and *vice versa*. Now, however, the gods must be allowed to care for the just man. This point is again framed in terms of ‘giving back’ to Sokrates something they had borrowed from him (ἀποδώσετε, 612e2; ἀποδώσομεν, 612e4). In the face of this cluster of credit vocabulary, I suggest that Sokrates claims to have ‘redeemed’ what he had earlier given to Glaukon and Adeimantos. We find confirmation in Sokrates’ words as he introduces the Myth of Er. Earthly rewards pale in comparison with those that await the soul of the just after death. These we must hear, in order that both the just and the unjust may receive in full the things which are *owed* (ὀφειλόμενα) by the argument (614a7–8).

This language emphasises the integration of the myth with the rest of the dialogue. It also recalls the complex of sun, line, and cave, which was described as *tokos*, interest on a debt that Sokrates promised to pay. This debt was an account of the Good. The Myth of Er, by contrast, is not called interest. It is part of the debt itself, an evocation of post-mortem reward that is owed to the argument. Sokrates merely loaned external rewards for justice to Glaukon and Adeimantos for the sake of the argument, so that justice and injustice could be analysed for themselves

<sup>42</sup> Jowett and Campbell 1894: 464–5 (noting that the use of the middle voice of the verb to mean ‘pay a debt’ is badly attested); Adam 1902: 429; Halliwell 1988: 83.

alone (612c7–d1). Rather than Sokrates being in debt, as he was earlier, he is here the creditor. He has redeemed the arguments in favour of justice and can move on to demand repayment of the principal. But however far we push the metaphor, one thing is certain. The myth is owed to the argument. It is not a surplus.<sup>43</sup>

Just as Sokrates has reservations about his ability to give an account of the Good, he cannot give a picture of what the soul is like because we lack knowledge about it and are contaminated by our contact with the body. Logical analysis has not pictured the fate of the soul after death. The Myth of Er has no claim to accuracy, but it can provide us with an analogue for the unimaginable internal benefits of the soul that pursues philosophy. It provides the first step towards seeing the soul without its mortal encrustations, and narrates the disembodied soul in its cycle of reincarnation. This eschatological narrative conspicuously does not present the soul of those purified by philosophy, perhaps because no imagistic analogue for it exists.<sup>44</sup> The image of the god Glaukos works negatively by suggesting accretion and mutilation, but as a result, we are left with no positive image of the purified soul. Plato's language at 612a4 hesitates to say whether the true nature of the soul is multiform or uniform and thus stresses the present impossibility of giving this kind of soul a shape. As far as the world of the dialogue is concerned, no such soul has ever existed; it is a hope for the future. The Myth of Er carries the concerns of the dialogue to their logical conclusion.

The myth is a continuation of the condemnation of poetry in the first half of Book 10. Poetry is imitation and does not represent truth, but only its appearance. The imitator, since he lacks knowledge, has no control over the rightness of his imitations. Poetry is further condemned because it appeals to the baser parts of our souls and is thus a moral impediment. It fixes our attention on this world and makes us take seriously things which we should not (604c5–d2). No human thing is worthy of great seriousness, however (604b10–c1). Until poetry can be proved to be beneficial, we must hold out against it, 'chanting to ourselves the argument (*logos*) we have spoken – this incantation (ἐπωδὴν) (608a3–4). The stakes are great, for 'the contest is great' (608b4). Two elements here recall the *Phaedo*. The first is the use of

<sup>43</sup> I do not share Annas' (1982: 130–1) discomfort with the reappearance of consequentialist implications for justice in Book 10. Adeimantos rules out 'humanly recognisable external success' as irrelevant to the argument in Book 2 (367b–e), but we need not transfer his criteria to Sokrates, for whom the external consequences of justice are consequences of the argument and of the immortality of the soul.

<sup>44</sup> Contrast Annas 1982: 135, who opts for a more pessimistic reading.



discourse as a charm to keep us on the right philosophical track. The second is the stress on the importance of the charm: the great contest of the *Republic* is the same as the noble prize and the noble danger of the *Phaedo* (114c–d). The meaning of both struggles derives from the immortality of the soul. Structurally, then, the charm which is the myth of the *Phaedo* is the same as the charm of the *Republic*, which is the repudiation of poetry. It is no accident that the Myth of Er follows soon after the dismissal of the poets. In response to Sokrates' call for the lover of poetry to defend it in prose, Plato presents not a defence, but a replacement.

This analysis helps us understand why Sokrates does not go the route of the *Gorgias* and *Phaedo* in citing poetic authority as a source for the myth. Although Hesiod and Homer are considered paradigmatic for the rewards of virtue and the punishments of vice by Sokrates' audience (612b2), Sokrates is careful not to associate himself with them. One reason for this is that poets lack knowledge. Another problem lies inherent in the practice of poetry. Poetry is ambiguous and complex and lends itself to many interpretations; it is not, therefore, a suitable authority for the rewards of the just. This was demonstrated earlier in the dialogue, when Adeimantos supplemented Glaukon's arguments that the unjust man has a better time both in this world and the next (363–6). He cites the authority of Homer, Hesiod, and Mousaios for the rewards of the just (363d1–2). However, this testimony is not unanimous, since they also suggest that the gods can be swayed by prayers and ritual purifications. Adeimantos' comments indicate that poetic practice is irretrievably contaminated by contradiction.<sup>45</sup> Philosophical myth, on the other hand, starts with a rationally-based axiomatic assumption that the gods will take care of the good man.

The details of the myth may be summarised briefly. Er is a soldier who has a near-death experience and returns to narrate it. He tells of a place where the souls of the dead are punished or rewarded for their actions during this life. As in the *Gorgias*, incurable sinners suffer eternal torture. The souls then approach the spindle of Necessity, which is attended by Sirens and the Fates. Lots are cast and each soul is given the opportunity to make a free choice of the kind of life they will live in their next incarnation. This choice is the greatest risk (κίνδυνος, 618b7) for man, for one must be able to distinguish the sort of life that will bring happiness or misery. The first to choose foolishly selects a cannibalistic tyranny. He was one of the (previously) blessed souls rewarded for a

<sup>45</sup> Compare *Meno* 95d–e; *Protagoras* 347e.

virtuous life. He had, however, pursued virtue as a member of a well-ordered state, and not through any commitment to philosophy. The majority of foolish choices were made by people of this type (619b7–d3). After their choice, the souls must drink an amount of the River of Forgetfulness. Wise souls drink only as much as they have to, so that they have some chance of remembering the lessons they have learned. Then they depart to be re-embodied and Er wakes up on his funeral pyre.

The self-qualification of the myth lies in its confession of human ignorance concerning the nature of the soul and in its presentation as a tale told by someone else. Moreover, as Sokrates finishes his narrative he makes a distinction between himself and Er. The myth, he tells us, can save us, and if we obey it, we shall cross the river of Lethe well, and will not corrupt our soul. But if we obey Sokrates and believe the soul immortal we shall always pursue the ‘upper road’ and practise justice with wisdom so that we may fare well both in this life and in the thousand-year journey he has described (621b8–d2). The advice of Sokrates and the myth thus converge and interpenetrate each other. The myth teaches us that we must try to retain as much memory of the world beyond as possible. Even though the myth is not, ostensibly, a product of the Socratic imagination, it is a product of his argument and is therefore both validated and not validated by him. Its warning not to defile the soul looks directly to Sokrates’ comments on the encrustation of the soul in 611c7–d7. Sokrates’ statement, in turn, summarises the conclusions he made before he started the myth but adds the elements of the thousand year journey and the upper road from the myth. The appearance of the journey in the summation corresponds to the place of the myth in the discussion as a whole; while the upper road provides us with a model for present behaviour, it also stands for the knowledge of the afterlife of the soul which is at present unavailable to us.

The Myth of Er is the culmination of tendencies at work in the *Gorgias* and *Phaedo*. These final myths are constructed on the basis of reasoned argument and express a meta-logical intuition about the nature of the soul. All draw attention to the qualified nature of their utterance as a way of stressing the difficulty of talking about the metaphysical and of pointing out the importance of using language correctly, for of all forms of discourse the mythical stands forth most clearly as a result of art. If we do not reflect upon the use of differing types of language, our philosophical laziness reflects upon the soul. The Myth of Er stands out because it is more consciously separated from the main body of the

argument, even though it is explicitly said to be owed to it. Both the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedo* contained preliminary forays into mythological material approximately half way through. They were unsuccessful because Sokrates had not yet developed the argumentation that would allow eschatological narrative to be deployed on a philosophical base. When such narrative is reintroduced at the end of the dialogues, Sokrates' argumentation is complete. The strategy of the *Republic* forestalls premature mythological excursions. By bringing up post-mortem considerations through the mouth of the intellectually naive Kephalos, and by having Glaukon and Adeimantos dismiss them, Plato can ensure that the rewards of virtue are brought into the dialogue only at their proper time. Rather than being an aspect of faith that muddies the argumentative waters, eschatology can take a well-defined place in a philosophical world-view.

#### THE PHAEDRUS

##### *Introduction*

The need to be self-conscious about the authority we attribute to our arguments and beliefs has been a leitmotiv in my discussion of Platonic myth. It arises because of the limitations of human knowledge and language. We exist in a world of sensible images, and must develop a rational framework for organising them. The creation of myths plays an important part in advancing discursive reflectiveness. Its ties to argument in *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* demonstrate how Sokrates refines his belief that we must examine the soul from an eternal perspective by grounding it in the best logical analysis he can muster. Sokrates wishes to move from philosophically-informed moral intuitions to knowledge, to create not just a likeness of the truth, but the truth itself. He can achieve this only by subjecting the beliefs of his interlocutors to analysis and insisting that all participants in philosophical discussion see their argumentation from the correct perspective. In the *Phaedrus* the rhetorical status of myth, dialectic, and the Platonic dialogue itself take centre stage. Mythological material comes early and pervades the dialogue to an extent even greater than Sokrates recognises. Myth, dialectic, and the rhetoric through which they are presented are not just practised, but thematised. The *Phaedrus* is about love, rhetoric, philosophy, and the levels on which they interact, and carries one step further concerns about the place of myth and eschatological

narrative in philosophical dialogue. I shall, therefore, be following the lead of those who think the *Phaedrus* paradigmatic of Platonic writing and its problems.<sup>46</sup>

The *Phaedrus* presents an elaborate narrative of the world of the disembodied soul as conceived by Sokrates' philosophical intuition. This intuition is the philosophical version of poetic inspiration, but differs from it in ways that I shall specify. But marvellous and impressive as the myth is, it is not the product of scientific knowledge. Serious searchers for knowledge must start with the austerities of dialectic. The dialogue shows us, then, how our intuitions and obscure excitements must be harnessed by philosophical method in order to become productive, and this goes for Phaidros as well as Sokrates. Phaidros must be converted from uncritical adulation of clever rhetoric to an appreciation of what really makes speech effective. The myth is paradigmatically self-referential because it both presents to Phaidros a narrative of increasing discursive and self-awareness through devotion to philosophy, and (taken with the discussion that follows) demonstrates why it is subject in itself to the criticism of not being a product of knowledge. It is thus a game, but the dialogue points out that any written exercise is a game. Both myth and dialogue are not the most serious form of philosophy. Neither does the Platonic dialogue, then, express knowledge, but only an aspiration towards it that will be realised, if at all, in real-life philosophical discussion.

Let us begin with a summary of the dialogue. As the action begins, Sokrates meets his friend Phaidros out for a walk outside the city walls. Phaidros has just heard an impressive display by the orator Lysias, arguing that it is better for a boy who is considering granting his sexual favours to yield to someone who does not love him rather than to someone who does. After some persuasion, Phaidros reads this speech to Sokrates, who then criticises it for the poor arrangement of its arguments. Challenged by Phaidros to produce a superior speech, Sokrates takes on the persona of a lover who pretends not to be one, and argues his case. He starts with a definition of love as the mastery over good judgement of the irrational desire for bodily beauty and then proceeds with a devastating catalogue of the vices of the obsessed lover. After finishing his speech, Sokrates prepares to leave, but is prevented by his *daimonion*. He has offended heaven by slandering Love, and must now make atonement.

<sup>46</sup> Rowe 1986a: 114.

The second speech starts with a redefinition of love as one of four types of madness sent by heaven to benefit men. In order to investigate the matter properly, one must look at the nature of the soul. Sokrates achieves this first by a proof of the soul's immortality, and then by constructing an image of the soul. The mortal soul is like a winged chariot team and charioteer. Of the two horses in the team, one is black and represents the base desires, and one is white and represents spirited and noble desires. The charioteer represents the ruling intellect. These psychic chariot teams follow those of the gods. When the divine teams ascend to their banquet, they journey to the top of heaven, and are carried around by its revolution, standing upon its back. During this revolution they look upon the Forms and are nourished. Fortunate human souls join in, but because their horses are at variance they do not attain steady contemplation of the Forms. During this struggle to see reality souls may lose their wings and become incarnated. During the ten thousand years it takes to regain the soul's wings, the soul is repeatedly reincarnated, suffering punishment or reward in-between, depending on its virtue or vice while in the flesh. The soul of the philosophical lover, however, has a possibility for early escape, since it can make correct use of its memories of the Forms in order to regrow its wings.

Love occurs when the soul sees a beautiful body and is reminded of the Form of Beauty. This recollection of Beauty causes the wings of the soul to sprout, which in turn causes psychic torment. Each lover will behave differently, depending on which god he or she followed before incarnation. They pattern themselves upon this god and endeavour to transform their beloved accordingly. The establishment of the love relationship is fraught with difficulty, however, due to the lustful inclinations of the soul's black horse. If the charioteer can discipline his chariot team sufficiently, the relationship will be philosophical and physically unconsummated. If not, their life will be more or less blessed depending upon the extent to which the black or white horses win out. Sokrates ends his speech with a prayer to the god of love to help Phaidros and himself live for love and philosophy.

In the aftermath of Sokrates' performance, the conversation turns to an examination of the nature of good and bad writing. Phaidros advances the claims of seeming (*doxa*) as the most important aspect of persuasion. Sokrates asserts that the best orator will be the one who knows the truth of the subject; only such a one can claim to speak with skill (*techne*). True rhetoric is the art of the correct manipulation of

similarities and differences. Sokrates mines his own second speech for its exemplification of the techniques of collection and division. He is a lover of these techniques, and he calls their practitioners 'dialecticians'. Contemporary rhetoric falls far short of knowledge based upon these procedures. Current manuals are catalogues of verbal artifice, but do not provide the knowledge requisite for the correct application of such preliminaries. A skilled orator will be able to match his discourse to the souls of his audience, and this requires dialectic. The counter argument to this contention is that only the plausible (*eikos*) is necessary for persuasion. Yet the effective deployment of the plausible will also depend on the discovery of the truth which the plausible resembles.

The final topic of the dialogue is propriety and impropriety in writing. Sokrates' myth of the Egyptian gods Theuth and Thamos makes the point that writing is an aid not to memory but to reminding, and manufactures only the semblance of wisdom. Once something is reduced to writing it can no longer respond to questioning. Legitimate discourse accompanies knowledge, and is written in the soul of the listener. This is the only serious discourse; written works should be composed playfully, as reminders, since they are necessarily fanciful. Only the philosopher is self-conscious about the status of his written and spoken discourse; only the philosopher can be a scientific rhetorician.

This summary gives some idea of the complexity of the dialogue. Sokrates' second speech is sometimes perceived as upsetting the balance of the work.<sup>47</sup> Its elaboration calls attention to questions of proportionate and disproportionate composition. Such concerns are thematised in the second part of the dialogue, and we may therefore assume that the rhetorical splendour of Sokrates' display is purposeful. What amount of splendour is appropriate to the subject? How is it connected to philosophical enquiry? (These questions will recur with the myth of the *Statesman*.) True rhetoric, as the dialogue teaches us, has an obligation to truth. The greater the speaker's knowledge, the more effective the rhetoric. If Sokrates' speech is impressive, this must be because he has a good grasp of the truth. But what kind of grasp? The second part of the dialogue specifies the conditions under which Sokrates' inspired oratory might connect with philosophical argument. Nevertheless, the magnificence and length of the myth of the charioteer indicates the importance

<sup>47</sup> Hackforth 1952: 136. The problem, as Rowe remarks (1986a: 106), is one of scale. For a pessimistic assessment, see Cole 1991: 8, 'There is no passage of comparable length and brilliance whose total excision from the Platonic corpus would be of less consequence for our understanding of Platonic philosophy.'

of the subject, since the myth is represented as a *short* and simplified version of a topic that would require even greater elaboration and argument in order to achieve accuracy (246a4–6). The impingement of the transcendental into our sensible world creates emotional splendour as well as the need for analysis.

The second speech presents Sokrates' inspired and intuitive grasp of the truth of the soul. Because Sokrates is already a philosopher, his myth-making is informed by analytic modes of presentation. He has started the process of recollective self-awareness portrayed in the myth. This is why elements of his inspired analysis help to determine the theoretical formulation of rhetoric which follows. The cross-referencing between the two sections is more significant than the mere coincidence of the methodology of collection and division. Key themes of the myth of the soul are taken up and reworked in the discussion of rhetoric. In retrospect, themes from the myth can be seen operating in the first part of the dialogue also, even before Sokrates begins his palinode. The content of the speech is not merely the product of a rhetorical exercise but has a philosophical authority derived from outside the discussion of methodology. This authority is a result of Sokrates' 'possession', his intuitive vision of the truth of the human soul which I shall compare to the lover's sudden recollection of the beautiful (249d–e). The content of the myth thus helps structure the entire dialogue, as Socratic intuition stimulates a discussion of methodology and becomes the starting point for dialectical enquiry.

The proper and improper use of mythological material is thematised in the opening scene. As Sokrates and Phaidros paddle in the Ilissos, Phaidros asks whether Sokrates believes the story of the wind god Boreas' abduction of the Athenian princess Oreithyia is true. Sokrates replies with a rationalising explanation of the myth such as the 'wise' would give, that the princess was really blown down from the rocks by the north wind and died. Personally, however, he finds such explanations too laboured and too much work for the rationaliser who will attempt to explain all myths this way. Sokrates does not have time for such pursuits, since he has not yet obeyed the Delphic command to know himself. Is he more complex and more puffed up than Typhon, or gentler and simpler, possessing some divine portion (229b4–230a6)? Several points are of interest here. Sokrates does not dispute the possible truth of a rationalistic explanation. Nevertheless, he thinks it a waste of time in the face of more pressing philosophical business. Sokrates' use of the figure of Typhon is an example of a more productive way to employ

the old stories. Here, a mythological creature serves as the starting point for philosophical reflection, a standard by which to judge oneself.<sup>48</sup>

This sort of comparison could easily slide into allegory, but Sokrates keeps it at the level of an implicit simile. This anticipates the procedure of the palinode, where the soul is likened to a charioteer and team, but there are differences. The comparison with Typhon does not allow a one-to-one correspondence: Sokrates must either be more or less monstrous than Typhon.<sup>49</sup> The image of the charioteer, however, implies a greater degree of identity. Pre-existing mythological figures produce an inexact correspondence between primary sense and undersense, but this problem is not present when an image or story is invented to fit the context. The opening of the dialogue thus disposes of a rival system of dealing with myth: rationalisation. Both Plato and the rationalisers seek truth in myths, but whereas rationalisation searches for a mundane and historical truth under a fantastic mythological exterior, Plato seeks an internal and significant truth concerning the human soul. Traditional myths are not good vehicles for philosophical truth, but are full of extraneous details which threaten the consistency of the philosophical message. Methodologies like rationalisation and allegory are arbitrary and reductive. Reductive, because they strip away surface complexity and claim to discover a simple truth. Arbitrary, because no such analysis can exhaust interpretative possibilities. As Sokrates remarks, the rationaliser is faced with an never-ending task; once one has decoded one detail, one is compelled to continue. Platonic myth, however, signals that an issue is too complex for a simplistic formulation.<sup>50</sup> It produces likenesses that do not claim to reveal exact truth. Far from being arbitrary, it arises naturally from philosophical discourse. Instead of being reductive, it signals a complexity that arises from incomplete knowledge and from the difficulty of a subject that refuses simplistic formulation.

*The myth of the charioteer and Sokrates' second speech*

The myth of the charioteer, inspired by Sokrates' divine voice and spoken in the person of Stesikhoros (242bc, 244a), presents a philosophi-

<sup>48</sup> Ferrari 1987: 12; Burger 1980: 5. For the anticipation of the palinode in Sokrates' consideration of Typhon, see Ferrari 1987: 11.

<sup>49</sup> Griswold 1986: 39–42. Nightingale 1995: 134–5 discusses further thematic implications of Typhonic plurivocality.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. McCabe 1992: 60 and *passim*.



cally-informed image of the nature and experiences of the soul. It is characterised by nascent philosophical method and by the reasoned (non-arbitrary) creation of likenesses. It is a tribute to the power of memory, and itself exemplifies that power since it is a recollective image. Sokrates' palinode begins (unlike the disordered beginning of Lysias' speech) with a classification of the concept of madness, but the eschatological narrative does not begin until Sokrates has given a formal proof of the immortality of the soul (245c–246a). The proof forms a transition between the classification of madness and the deeds of the soul, and provides a reasoned basis for the myth proper.<sup>51</sup> The need for such a procedure is stressed as Sokrates begins to discuss psychic tripartition. He deprecates the fact that, although we have never seen or adequately conceived god, we picture an immortal animal composed of a body and soul united for all time, whereas only the soul is immortal. This image is created 'as a result of not even one reasoned argument' (οὐδ' ἐξ ἑνὸς λόγου λελογισμένου) (246c6–d3). The formulation implies that it is possible to create an image with a rational basis. All the eschatological myths so far considered are of this type, and the myth of the charioteer is no exception.

The philosophical pedigree of the speech extends beyond the immortality proof. Although Sokrates' later assessment of the speech assigns little importance to its content, he does concede that it exemplified the important technique of collection and division (265c8–d1). At the beginning of the speech, divine madness was distinguished from the human kind and was subsequently divided into four sub-groups (266a, 244a). The division of madness is the only example of the method to which Sokrates specifically refers in the discussion following the myth, but this method is at least previewed in the myth itself. As they journey through the heavens, the gods and *daimones* are separated into orderly divisions (246e4–247a7). This is later expanded (252c2–253c2), as we learn that human character types are derived from the divine divisions. The soul itself is divided into three parts, two of them horse shaped, and one having the form of a charioteer (253c7–d1). The division into character types is also implicit in the way humans react to love: some yield to carnal desire (250e), some lead partially philosophical lives (256b7–e1), and some become philosophers (256a7–b7). These divisions occur as a product of 'likeness-making' (ἁπείκάζοντες, 265b6), an activity one might think far removed from strict dialectic. Indeed, Sokrates claims to

<sup>51</sup> For Sinaiko 1965: 98–9 the immortality proof is the single generalisation from which all else follows.

have been possessed throughout the entire speech and not to remember what he said (263d2). Dialectical method has been foreshadowed in an inspired and mythical discourse. The impulse to classify, although not identical with the method of division, is an important step on the way to dialectic. Sokrates thinks that this happened by chance (265c9), but the reader knows better.<sup>52</sup>

Sokrates' 'enthusiasm' causes him to forget his use of method in his creation of a mythical image. He professes to need Phaidros to remind him of the speech's content. Philosophical conversation helps us understand the images we create and convert our *mythoi* to *logoi*. The role of memory in the creation of a likeness or image is of crucial importance for the dialogue. The themes of memory and of image-making are deployed in the second speech, adumbrated in the beginning scenes of the dialogue, and transformed during the methodological discussion of rhetoric. The creation of philosophical methodology and rhetoric is a formalisation of the themes and impulses of the myth, as Sokrates, Phaidros, and Plato's readers move towards a greater awareness of the discursive categories they employ. The self-consciousness of the move from myth to dialectic models the sensitivity to discursive mode necessary for philosophical progress.

The myth of the charioteer contrasts the intelligible world inhabited by psychic entities and the Forms, and the sensible and corporeal world. Memory forges a connection between the latter and the former. Its true domain is the world of the Forms. It is a substitute for actual presence in the world of truth. When the gods go to their banquet they look upon the Forms, and are nourished (247d5–6). This is the 'Plain of Truth' that provides the best pasturage for the soul and helps its wings to grow (248b5–c2). Fortunate human souls join in this revolution (248a3–4), but because of the instability of the chariot team their vision is incomplete. Total failure to see any of the Forms results in incarnation, and it is here that memory is first explicitly thematised. If a soul is incapable of following its god, and meets with some misfortune, it can become weighed down with 'forgetfulness' and vice (248c7). It may then lose its wings, take a body, and be born into our world. At 249b6–7 Sokrates defines humanity itself by means of memory. A man must pass from many perceptions to one thing which is brought together by reasoning. This process is labelled 'recollection' (*ἀνάμνησις*, 249c2) of

<sup>52</sup> As Ferrari 1987: 53 observes, Sokrates' appeal to serendipity here forces us to realise that Plato has loaded the dice and written in a spontaneous effect. Burger 1980: 77 also notes the irony. For this type of Platonic irony generally, see Rowe 1987.

the Forms the soul saw in the place beyond the heavens. Recollection is the key to regaining the soul's plumage (249c4–d2), and it is best practised by the philosopher who is continually close in memory (μνήμη, 249c5) to those things (the Forms) proximity to which makes a god divine. A philosopher's recollection seems to the multitude to be madness, although what he is really doing is employing reminders (ὑπομνήμασιν, 249c7). It is through memory that incarnate man recovers the Forms.

Memory plays a crucial role in the pathology of love, since love is characterised as our reaction to an 'image' (εἶδωλον, 250d4–6) of a Form that stimulates recollection of its original. Like the philosopher, the lover remembers the Form and is considered mad. In his case it is the Form of beauty (ὀρῶν κάλλος, τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἀναμνησκόμενος, 249d5–6). But recollection is not easy, since the soul may be corrupted by the flesh and experience 'forgetfulness' (250a4). Still, some souls retain sufficient memory to become lovers, obtaining metaphorical freedom from their bodies: they are no longer inside themselves (250a7) as their memory is carried towards the nature of the beautiful (254b5–6). The verb 'to carry' used to describe being carried towards the Forms (ἡνέχθη, 254b6) recalls the motion of the soul as it is swept along in the motion of the heavens (συμπεριηνέχθη, 248a3, cf. a8). As Sokrates closes his account of the place beyond the heavens, he almost elevates memory to divine status: 'Let these words be pleasing to Memory' (μνήμη, 250c7).

The process of educating oneself and one's beloved once a love-affair has begun also depends on the exercise of remembrance. Memory is closely connected with the creation of resemblance, and is instrumental in the transformation of a lover into a philosopher. Every lover seeks a beloved whose character is like the god they followed while disembodied (252e–253c6). Having found one he attempts to make himself and his beloved a perfect image of the god and thus share in the divine. The means of effecting this transformation is the 'memory' with which they grasp their god (ἐφαπτόμενοι αὐτοῦ τῇ μνήμῃ, 253a2–3). Just as the charioteer is ruled by his memory, so the black horse of the soul has a debased kind of memory (254a6).<sup>53</sup> The black horse forces the charioteer and the white horse to remember the joys of sex, and although they affect to have forgotten (ἀμνημονεῖν) their agreement to approach the beloved, he reminds them (ἀναμνησκων) (254d3–4). This debased

<sup>53</sup> Designated not by μνήμη but by μνεία.

kind of memory, based on the experience of the sensible world, corresponds to the rhetoric later criticised for its disregard of truth.<sup>54</sup>

Memory is central in Plato's mythical account of the human soul. Its use determines the fate of the soul.<sup>55</sup> We need to specify, however, the precise connection between memory and recollection. Sokrates speaks in terms that imply both that every lover engages in recollection (249d5–6, 250a1, 254b5–6), and that only the philosophical lover does so (249b6–d2).<sup>56</sup> In each case, memory transports the recollector to the vicinity of the Forms, but philosophical recollection must clearly be a different experience from the sudden rush of emotion that accompanies the sight of a beautiful body. I propose to understand the difference in terms of reflexive self-awareness. Recollection is a two-stage process that starts with erotic inrush and ends, under the best circumstances, with philosophical self-examination and dialectic. This process parallels the movement from myth to discussion of dialectic in the dialogue. Sokrates and Phaidros start with belief, but end with the prospect of *technē*. Let us survey this procedure at work in the lover and beloved. We are told that neither has any real perception of the nature of his experience.<sup>57</sup> The lover is maddened when he sees an image of beauty, but is at a loss because he does not sufficiently understand it (250a7–b1). Similarly, when the beloved begins to reciprocate his lover's passion, he is intellectually confused: 'he loves, but he is at a loss for what he loves; he neither knows what he has experienced, nor can he explain it' (255d3–4). By the end of their life together, however, if they retain their self-control, they are living a life of philosophy (256a7). This philosophy

<sup>54</sup> Ferrari 1987: 186 points out how thought and feeling are correspondingly represented in the charioteer and the black horse, and (198) connects the rhetoric of the black horse (254c7) with the 'prudential' use of reason in the speeches of the non-lovers.

<sup>55</sup> As it does in the *Republic*, where the choice of reincarnated life in the Myth of Er depends on how well one retains the lessons of a previous life.

<sup>56</sup> Recent discussion has centred on whether recollection happens to all human beings and can be used as an explanation of concept formation, or whether it should be restricted to philosophers. At issue is how to interpret the assertion that a human must understand what is spoken according to form, and pass from many perceptions to a unity gathered together by reasoning (reading Badham's conjecture *lóvτ* for *lóv* at 249b7. So Thompson 1868: 55 and Hackforth 1952: 86, but see Scott 1995: 77, n. 26). This has traditionally been understood to mean that all humans engage in recollection at some level. Against this it has been argued first, that the person who recollects is set apart from the many throughout the myth. Second, that some people do not see a beautiful body as a likeness of the original Form at all, but surrender to sensual pleasures; only the lover treats the sensibles as reminders of the Forms. Third, that the language of necessity employed by Plato is prescriptive rather than descriptive (Scott 1995: 73–80). I answer these objections above.

<sup>57</sup> Ferrari 1987: 177 stresses the relative clarity of the lover's perception as opposed to the beloved's, but the lover's emotion is not necessarily due to the fact that he knows he has seen an image of a Form.

involves coming to an understanding of the nature of their passion in order to master it.

The lover's inability to comprehend the nature of his experience recalls Sokrates' statement that a human must pass from many perceptions to a unity gathered together by reason (249b7–c1). Evidently, the capacity (which the next sentence defines as recollection) is inherent, but not always operative. The recollection of 249b7–8 is a conscious product of reason, and it is conscious philosophy which results from the lovers' educative process. We move from intuitive and unconscious recollection to a rational and deliberate version of the same act as the love-affair progresses. Starting with a perception of the beautiful which leaves us at a loss, we move from confused and multiple perceptions to a more theoretical understanding. The recollecting lover is indeed set apart from the many during the myth. But we should note that his recollection of the Form of the beautiful is particularly intense because beauty enjoys a special status in the sensible world: we can perceive it with our eyes. Only beauty has this allotment and it is therefore most clear and most loveable to us (250d7–e1). We have no sense organs to perceive wisdom, otherwise our passion for it would be equally intense (250d3–6). In the case of beauty, the issue is whether we have sufficient memory to be divinely maddened or whether we merely pursue physical pleasure. Those better endowed with memory reverence beauty (250a). He who is less well endowed 'is not quickly carried from here towards beauty itself when he sees its namesake here, so that he does not reverence it when he looks upon it, but gives himself over to pleasure' (250e2–4).

It is clear that even the lustful lover recollects beauty on some level, otherwise he would not lust at all. Because his soul is sluggish, however, he does not experience transcendent religious emotion and does not realise what is going on. Even the reverential lover does not at first understand his experience, and only a few have the ability to abstract from the experience and turn to philosophy. Only philosophers use the experience of recollection as a tool for self-conscious reflection and thus engage in a more systematic recollection. They use their intellect to perceive other Forms, such as wisdom and justice. When Sokrates says that a human 'must pass from many perceptions to a unity gathered together by reason', he is referring to the self-conscious dialectical approach to the Forms that occurs when one analyses the recollective process. His language is rightly understood as prescriptive, but this does not entail that humans do not undergo unreflective recollection. Recollection explains our reaction when we are confronted with an image of a Form, but also describes philosophical analysis.

This philosophical recollection foreshadows the method of collection and division elaborated in the second part of the dialogue.<sup>58</sup> Recollection involves 'understanding what is spoken according to form, passing from many perceptions to a unity gathered together by reason' (249b7–c1). In the method of collection one must 'bring things that are widely scattered into a single form, seeing them together, so as to make clear what it is one wants to teach on any given occasion when defining each thing' (265d3–5). The many perceptions which one overcomes in recollection correspond to the scattered elements in collection, and the unity brought together by reasoning in the former corresponds to taking particulars together and subsuming them under one idea in the latter. The description of recollection differs only in that it does not mention anything analogous to division. The two processes are not identical, since collection and division are more methodical. As we would expect in a myth, the precise mechanics of philosophical recollection are not specified, but we have seen evidence that recollection leads to analysis if correctly employed. The sexless and philosophical love-affair certainly implies analysis (256a5–b3).

The absence of division as an explicit consequence of recollection need not trouble us. The basic human dilemma is that we live in a world of particulars and are not inclined to generalise. The experience of recollection takes us in one leap to the world of the general and the Form, but as the myth has told us, even the extra-corporeal perspective is not permanent. Human existence implies an awareness of the particular, but we have an innate capacity (one not always employed) to move to the general. This is the whole point of the myth, which therefore stresses this one aspect. When we move to dialectic, even awareness of the particular becomes self-conscious, and the description of division at 265e1–266b1 recalls closely the language of recollection in 249. Division involves cutting 'in accordance with forms' (κατ' εἶδη, 265e1) and the two speeches took madness as 'one common form' (ἐν τῇ κοινῇ εἶδος, 265e4) before dividing the concept, just as recollection involves understanding what is spoken 'in accordance with form' (κατ' εἶδος) and perceiving a 'one' (ἐν, 249b6–c1).

My interpretation of recollection is supported by the presentation of recollection in the *Meno*. Sokrates relates a *logos* which is told by men and

<sup>58</sup> Griswold 1986: 116 disputes the connection, since: (1) division is not mentioned in 249b–c; (2) recollection has no rules, but collection and division do; (3) the second half of the *Phaedrus* does not indicate that collection and division can be brought to bear upon the Forms. But we do not need precise correspondence to argue that analytic recollection in the myth is an imagistic rendering of dialectic.

women who are 'wise concerning divine matters' (81a5–6). They say that the soul is immortal and born many times, and that there is nothing it does not know. It is therefore not surprising that it recalls the things it knew before (81c8–9) and this process is recollection. Sokrates proceeds to demonstrate this theory in the famous episode where he elicits geometrical knowledge from a slave boy. As the demonstration finishes, Meno gives an uncertain assent: 'You seem to me to speak well, Sokrates, I don't know how' (86b5). Sokrates agrees: 'I think so too, Meno. I would not want to insist absolutely (δι᾽ ὅσυχρονισαίμην) on the other aspects of my argument, but that we would be better and braver and less lazy thinking that we should seek the things we don't know than if we should think it's impossible to discover what we don't understand, and that we shouldn't even try – on this subject I would fight to the last, if I were able, in both word and deed' (86b6–c2). He will not vouch for the details of recollection, but thinks that the message is a valuable one.

The language that surrounds the presentation of recollection here is familiar.<sup>59</sup> It is almost a marker for mythical discourse.<sup>60</sup> The discussion in the *Meno* is not called a *mythos*, however, nor does it involve much eschatology; its argumentative status is uncertain. The same theory can be regarded as both part of a myth and a seriously-held philosophical position. This is another indication of the extent to which the myth of the charioteer is penetrated by argument, but it also emphasises the importance of discursive context in the evaluation of any speech as mythological. Most noteworthy for present purposes is Sokrates' emphasis in the *Meno* that the process of recollection involves the conscious rediscovery of innate knowledge. True opinions, says Sokrates, are fine as long as they stay put, but they often don't 'until one pins them down by calculating the reason for them. This is recollection' (98a1–4). The connection of recollection with calculation echoes the *Phaedrus* and confirms that the path of the philosophical lovers towards knowledge involves the analysis of intuitive reactions. Spontaneous recollection in the *Meno* is only the beginning of a longer process that produces a rational understanding of the truths one intuitively (85c).

The process of analysis, then, is a natural outgrowth of recollection. If this is so, we can hope to reach the Forms by an application of method. We will not, of course, perceive them perfectly – only the gods of the myth can do that – but we will be as close to them as is humanly possible.

<sup>59</sup> See especially *Phaedo* 114d1–2.

<sup>60</sup> For recollection in the *Meno* as a myth, see Frutiger 1930: 67–72; J. A. Stewart [1905]/1960: 305–8; Elias 1984: 196–8.

The normal human operation of memory is transferred, with the help of philosophy, from the sensible to the intelligible sphere. We can better understand the relationship between the two spheres by examining a second governing theme of the myth (and dialogue), the creation of a likeness or image. This operation takes place on three levels in the speech: first, the myth itself is a created image; second, the things we see in our earthly existence are images of the world of reality; third, during the course of the perfect love affair, the lovers attempt to make themselves into the image of their god. On all these levels, the production of the image is a function of memory. This operation, moreover, is linked with the rhetorical method, for an orator exercises his powers of persuasion by virtue of his ability to present likenesses (261d10–e4).

After the proof of the immortality of the soul, Sokrates introduces the myth of the soul with the following words:

We must speak in the following way about the form of the soul. It is the task of a narrative that is absolutely long and divine in every way to tell what sort of thing it is (οἷον μὲν ἔστι), but it is the task of a human and shorter narrative to tell what it is like (ὥς δὲ ἔοικεν). Let us proceed, then, in this way. Let the soul be likened (ἐοικέτω) to the united power of a winged chariot team and charioteer (246a3–7).

A divine but long narrative about the soul is renounced in favour of a shorter and human account based on resemblance. What are the implications of this introduction? Sokrates will later declare that in the case of resemblances (ὁμοιότητας), the one who knows the truth will always produce the most beautiful ones (273d4–6). If Sokrates' second speech is an exemplification of true rhetoric, where an orator produces conviction in his audience (as Sokrates does in Phaidros) by creating a resemblance based upon his knowledge of the truth, it follows that Sokrates creates this image by tapping into a source of knowledge about the soul. The image is constructed as Sokrates remembers the truth and constructs an image of it. Yet it seems clear that his perception of this truth is not yet systematic, since he cannot give an account.

The soul's only access to the Forms while embodied is through recollection stimulated by seeing images (ὁμοιώμα, 250a6) of them. Few people, however, understand the relationship of the real and its images (εἰκόνας) and can use images to gaze upon the abstract type (τὸ τοῦ εἰκασθέντος γένος) (250b4–5). Imitation of the gods is also an issue. Whenever a soul which saw much in the place beyond the heavens sees a face which is 'godlike' (θεοειδές) and which copies well the Form of the



beautiful, he reveres it 'as a god' (ὥς θεόν) and would be willing to sacrifice to it 'as to a statue or god' (ὥς ἀγάλματι καὶ θεῷ) (251a1–7). We move from the beloved's beauty as the image of a Form to the beloved himself as the image of a god.

Even the soul disincarnate imitates. As the gods ascend to the place beyond the heavens, human souls attempt to follow. The soul which succeeds is that one which 'best follows and makes itself like (εἰκασμένη) to god' (248a1–2). In the earthly sphere this creative imitation is practised both upon oneself and on the beloved. Each soul lives honouring and imitating (μιμούμενος) the god it followed in heaven (252d1–2). When it finds a beloved it copies its god even more intently, assimilating the character of the god as it seeks to produce that same character in the beloved (252e5–253b1). The lover adorns his beloved 'like a statue, as though he were a god to him' (252d6–7). The image of the statue is taken up again from 251a and extended; now the statue is not merely worshipped, but modified to bring it closer to its prototype. This is explicitly stated at 253a6–b1: 'they make their beloved as far as possible most like to their god'. This process of reciprocal education is repeatedly emphasised (253b–c). The love of the beloved for the lover is also a copy (εἰδωλον ἔρωτος, 255d8) – in this case of the lover's passion. A hierarchy of imitation begins with the copying of the Forms by their earthly counterparts, passes through the copying of gods by humans, and ends with the copying of a reaction, the beloved's passion.

Perception of the beloved's beauty as an image of the Form leads to perception of the beloved as an image of god. This helps to clarify the mediating function of the gods between the Forms and man. Sokrates' statement at 249c5–6 implies that a god draws his divinity from his proximity to the Forms; he is divine insofar as he manages to embody their qualities. A god is in fact the perfect imitator. A god's success in this essential imitation is set up as a model for humans; we worship the gods because they provide to us what the Forms do not: the process rather than the state of perfection. We love our beloved in that his beauty is a stimulus to the recollection of the Forms. We revere our beloved as we do the gods, because through him we achieve a more perfect imitation of god, an imitation which in turn promises future permanence in the place beyond the heavens. The role of the gods as mediators may also give us a clue about the role of myth. To speak the literal truth about the soul would require a long and thoroughly 'divine' account (246a4–6). Because it is difficult for the human soul to perceive reality, we create an image (the myth), which is more 'human'. This discourse mediates

between us and the narrative about the intelligibles which a dialectician could recount. Even though the dialectician 'is continually close in memory to those things proximity to which makes a god divine' (249c5), he is still bound by the disadvantages of the flesh. Myth, therefore, is the characteristic discursive mode of the human condition.

Imitation in the myth is intimately connected with memory and recollection. The beauty of the beloved imitates the Form of the beautiful and thus acts as a reminder that triggers memory. The existence of natural images that are true representations of reality will later play an important part in the development of scientific rhetoric; the dialectical orator will be adept at finding them. On the other hand, the education of the lover and the beloved towards resemblance of god is also a product of memory. When the lover studies his god he is engaging in conscious imitative recollection. The truest lover becomes a philosopher because the philosopher is, by definition, also a lover – of wisdom and of collection and division (266b2). Sokrates says he follows such a lover 'as if he were a god' (266b7) and the parallelism to the situation of the lover who reveres his beloved as a god is clear. Sokrates' reasons for revering the dialectician approximate closely man's reasons for divine worship; the dialectician, as will become apparent, follows the same track the gods do.

### *The beginning of the dialogue*

The systematisation of the themes of memory and resemblance is the concern of the discussion of rhetoric that follows the myth. These themes are also anticipated in the interaction between Sokrates and Phaidros which leads up to Sokrates' second speech. Sokrates' intuited truth as expressed in the myth is a driving force in the dynamics of the dialogue. It informs the action even before the topic of discourse has been established and is a fundamental part of Sokrates' character as he lives the life of the philosopher. Readers of the dialogue can realise what the characters inside the dramatic action do not, that the mythical or intuitive aspect of Sokrates is more important than he openly admits.<sup>61</sup> The anticipation of the myth of the second speech contributes to the formal unity of the dialogue, and shows how the myth is a systematisation of certain aspects of spiritual dynamics inherent in a relationship between two people. It also demonstrates how the second speech is an

<sup>61</sup> For Platonic irony in the *Phaedrus*, see Griswold 1986: 12 with n. 21.

example of scientific rhetoric, since the content of that speech is adapted to the specific concerns of the beginning of the dialogue. There are three areas where this anticipation operates. First, in the serious play of Sokrates and Phaidros as they pretend in turn to be lover and beloved. This play includes Sokrates' claims to inspired madness, which forecast the recollective madness of the lover. Second, in the stress laid upon images. Lastly, in the analogy between the excursion outside the city and the experience of the soul on the back of heaven.

It has been widely remarked that Sokrates and Phaidros play out and exchange the roles of lover and beloved in the introduction. Sokrates assumes the role of lover as he asks Phaidros to tell him about Lysias' speech, but the situation is reversed in the aftermath of Lysias' speech when Phaidros tries to extract a speech from Sokrates.<sup>62</sup> This role-playing is conscious on their part, as Phaidros makes clear in his parody of Sokrates at 236c. Sokrates is not only a lover (of Phaidros' discourses), but an inspired one.<sup>63</sup> He is sick about speeches (228b6) and regards himself and Phaidros as 'fellow corybants' (228b7). Phaidros' recitation astounds him, knocks him out of himself (ἐκπλήγῃναι, 234d1) so that he joins in the other's Bacchic revel (234d5). All this, of course, reminds us of the inspired lover of the palinode, who is astounded by the sight of the beloved (ἐκπλήττονται, 250a6) and follows after him, infected with divine madness. We note that Sokrates was affected not by the speech itself but by the sight of Phaidros delivering it.

The inspiration which leads up to Sokrates' first speech is also described in terms reminiscent of the palinode, but not in ones which anticipate the description of *poetic* inspiration there. Sokrates says that he feels his breast is full of things to say. Since he knows his own ignorance, the words must be coming from elsewhere; he has been filled with streams of words, like a pot (235c5–d3). We think of the lover who is filled with a stream of beauty (251b2; 255c1), and who does not understand the nature of the experience (250a7–b1). Similarly, Sokrates stops in the middle of his speech to remark that he has suffered a 'divine' experience (238c6) and that the place itself is 'divine' (238c9–d1). This divine experience is very close to the divine madness of love. The dynamic of madness and love is marked as play of a special kind. Phaidros accuses Sokrates of making fun of him in his response to the speech (παίζειν, 234d7). Sokrates replies 'Do I then seem to you to be

<sup>62</sup> Griswold 1986: 29–32 elaborates on this role-exchange. See also Burger 1980: 12.

<sup>63</sup> Compare Ferrari 1987: 18.

joking and not serious?’ (234d8). As usual the deployment of this opposition encourages the reader to meditate on the connection between play and seriousness. When does play teach us something, and when is it empty frivolity?

Play sets the dialogue in motion. Sokrates’ attempt at ‘play’ leads Phaidros to demand a speech form from him (236a7–b4). Sokrates attempts to back away: ‘Are you serious (ἐσπούδακας) because, joking, I attacked your beloved, and do you think that I will really try to speak another more intricate speech?’ (236b5–8). Taking Sokrates seriously causes the game to take on philosophical significance. In the first two speeches the two friends play at the themes of Sokrates’ second speech, but each will be forced to take them seriously in the end. Sokrates’ inner voice tells him that his first speech was a sin. He knows this because he is a seer, although not a very *serious* one (σπουδαῖος 242c4). The play of the introduction leads first to one playful speech and then to the ‘play’ of the myth, the product of an intuition which cannot be entirely serious (because it is as yet unexamined), but which has serious implications.<sup>64</sup> The discussion of philosophical writing at the end of the dialogue returns us to the identical thematic complex. The philosopher/rhetorician will produce written works ‘for the sake of play’ (276d2), but a nobler and more serious engagement (σπουδῇ) is to write in the soul of the listener (276e5). No written work is ‘worthy of much seriousness’ (277e6–8). In the world of the dialogue, Lysias’ written speech and the play it instigated are valuable only insofar as they lead to speech and discussion, and the play of the myth is valuable insofar as it prepares us for the discussion of dialectic. The dialogue is also play, meant to lead to serious thought.<sup>65</sup> What the myth is to the dialogue, the dialogue is to our lives.

Considerable prominence is accorded to the theme of images and statues in the introduction. Phaidros wants to practise his declamatory skills on Sokrates by giving him his own version of Lysias’ speech, but Sokrates guesses correctly that Phaidros has a written copy of the speech concealed under his cloak. When Lysias himself is present (in the text of his speech), Sokrates refuses to put up with substitutions. He will not allow Phaidros to create an image. Phaidros is obsessed with images, and tries to tempt Sokrates to perform by means of them, promising life-sized golden statues of himself and of Sokrates at Delphi (235d7–e1), and a statue of Sokrates at Olympia (236b3–4). This temptation is

<sup>64</sup> Ferrari 1987: 67.

<sup>65</sup> Ferrari 1987: 212–13; Griswold 1986: 218.

unsuccessful. It is only when he threatens to deprive Sokrates of speeches that he prevails.<sup>66</sup>

As Phaidros' enthusiasm for Sokrates' prospective speech leads him to try and turn him into a statue, images from the palinode inform our reading. We recall that the lover's passion expresses itself in treating his beloved like a statue. If he were not afraid of being thought mad he would offer sacrifice to the beloved 'as to a statue and god' (251a6). This sentiment is repeated at 252d5–e1, where, however, the emphasis is on the transformative power of such adoration; the lover actually creates the image, but it is a living statue, not a static one. This is paradigmatic for successful image-making, and resembles the living discourse the philosophical rhetorician will plant in the heart of his audience. In both there is a vital interchange between what is planted or created and the reality to which it looks. The object of the creative activity, the beloved/student, is no passive recipient. By contrast, Phaidros' image-making is a poor thing. In trying to recreate Lysias' speech like a rhapsode, he attempts to create an image of what is, by the standards of the end of the dialogue, dead discourse. When he promises dedications of statuary, he offers to set up an unspeaking and therefore ineffective image of Sokrates.<sup>67</sup> Phaidros must learn to stop playing with dead images and become alive to the possibilities of philosophical interaction. Achieving this is part of Sokrates' intent when he fashions the myth of the charioteer around the themes of love and resemblance.

Another anticipation of the second speech operates on the level of dramatic action. The drama of the dialogue begins as Phaidros states his intention to take a 'walk (περίπατον) outside the walls' of Athens: (227a3). At this point in the dialogue, the word used for 'walk' (περίπατος) means little, but once we have read the myth of the charioteer, the excursion of Sokrates and Phaidros outside the city reminds us of the circular course of the gods as they gaze upon the Forms. Similarly the activity of the gods in their contemplation and the logocentric desire of Sokrates are both described in terms of banqueting imagery. Sokrates must respond to Phaidros' demand to speak or else be deprived of the 'banquet' of words (236e8), and in their ascent to the place beyond the heavens, the gods go to their 'banquet and feasting' (247a8).<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> On the resonance of the proposed statues at Delphi and Olympia, see Morgan 1994.

<sup>67</sup> Plato may have been thinking of the beginning of Pindar's *Nem.* 5: 'I am not a statue maker who makes statues that stand still on their bases.'

<sup>68</sup> Philip 1981; Griswold 1986: 33–4.

The anticipations of the palinode show how Sokrates' intuitive grasp of truth structures the introduction of the work and contributes to its formal unity. By systematising in the myth themes from the introduction, Plato indicates that the myth expresses a dynamic inherent in all personal exchange, even in a debased form. The passions which guide the desire for speech in the introduction are shown to be related to the passions which, according to the myth, fuel our entire existence. The character of Sokrates does not, of course, have this literary 'god's eye' view, but he does rework material that has special interest for Phaidros, such as the healthiness of passing outside one's usual sphere of operations, the intellectual banquet, and the idea of likenesses. Sokrates thus fulfils his own later stricture that the scientific orator must take into account the soul of the auditor and adapt his speech to it. The myth is thus philosophical rhetoric and plays an important part in turning Phaidros from a life of superficiality, based on thoughtless acceptance of rhetorical and social convention, to a life of philosophy that analyses the relationship of these conventions with the truth.

### *The discussion of rhetoric*

The second half of the dialogue deals with the counterpart of the philosophical lover, the philosophical rhetorician. Themes of the myth are reprised; memory and the creation of a likeness are important aspects in the art of the scientific orator. The myth and the discussion present complementary explorations of the nature of human relationships and intellectual activity. The discussion, however, provides a more formal and systematic treatment than the myth, and lays out the procedure by which Sokrates' philosophical intuitions may be converted to knowledge.

Just as Sokrates' speech began with the division of madness, so the discussion of rhetoric begins with an informal division of the concept of writing discourses. Sokrates asks whether anyone could reproach Lysias merely for being a writer (258c7-8). This would be unreasonable, for it is clear to everybody that it is not speech-writing that is shameful, but not writing well (258d1-4). Some kinds of writing are acceptable, and some disgraceful; the distinction will be between rhetoric based on knowledge and rhetoric based on opinion. Similarly in the case of madness there was a distinction between love based on conscious and virtuous recollection of the truth and merely human lust and madness. Another implicit division occurs as human concepts are separated into two classes, simple

and equivocal (263b). This example of proto-dialectical procedure is determined by the nature of the discussion; any treatment of division as a methodology is bound to involve classification of concepts. There is, however, a classification that is not methodologically pre-determined: the idea that human activities have corresponding Muses (259c–d). This recalls the classification of human souls under various gods in the myth,<sup>69</sup> and is itself part of a further myth told by Sokrates about the origin of cicadas. Even Sokrates' mythical impulses are informed by dialectic.

A further parallel between the myth and the discussion is that the successful law-giver and politician is called godlike (ἰσόθεον, 258c2), recalling the dynamic that operated between lover and beloved. Moreover, the contempt of politicians for speech-writers (257d4–8) recalls the criticism of love on the part of the dissimulating non-lover. Both criticise their own secret activity: the non-lover is really a lover; the politician is really such an avid composer of speeches that he adds the names of his admirers as a preamble to his composition (Sokrates refers to the publication of Athenian decrees and their opening clause 'Resolved by the Council and the People'). Talking about how we love is analogous to talking about how we speak. The analogy is based upon whom and what we admire and take as our model. The discussion of contemporary rhetoric censures the general reverence for the talented orator, and points the way to the figure of the dialectical rhetorician who approximates the gods in his vision of knowledge. It is the dialectician whom we should compare to a god (266b6–7).

The methodological affinity of Sokrates' second speech with the discussion of rhetoric and dialectic is matched by imagistic and thematic echoes. The philosopher on earth follows a path which is the image of the path the gods follow with the revolution of the heavens. This path is dialectic. The identity of these two paths is established by a complex of vocabulary echoes.<sup>70</sup> The circling of the sky which enables the souls to be carried around and look at the place beyond the heavens is called a 'revolution' or a 'circuit' (περιφορά, 247c1; περίοδος, 247d5). The verbs used to describe this motion generally signify 'to lead or carry round'.<sup>71</sup> As Sokrates describes the method of speaking which pleases the gods, he tells an imaginary audience not to wonder if the 'circuit' (περίοδος) is long, for the stakes in going around it are great (μεγάλων γὰρ ἔνεκα

<sup>69</sup> Plass [1968]/1979: 207.

<sup>70</sup> A number of these echoes were noted by Lebeck 1972: 284–5; cf. Ballew 1979: 90, 93.

<sup>71</sup> περιάγω: 247c1; περιφέρω: 247d5, 248a3, a8.

περιπλέον, 274a2). The circuit in question is the scientific approach to rhetoric, and it was earlier contrasted with the possibility, not to be realised, of an easy way of becoming a successful rhetorician by manipulating the plausible (*eikos*). Sokrates refers to this option as 'a shorter and easier way to skill, so that one would not have to make a long and rough journey in vain when it is possible to make a short and smooth one' (272b8–c2). We should associate the long and rough road with the soul's struggle to reach the world of the Forms in the myth.

This passage also takes us back to the myth: to describe accurately the reality of the soul would require a 'long and divine narrative' (246a4–5). We now realise that this long statement would be a dialectical description.<sup>72</sup> The scientific approach to rhetoric is dialectic, whose object is truth and the Forms. These are the 'great things' for whose sake we must take the circular road, and for whose sake the gods too climb up the vault of heaven. Because the road of dialectic is an image of the road the gods take, the description would be divine. The shorter and human path chosen in the myth does not lead to conscious and scientific knowledge and therefore cannot produce conscious skill; it is the short and smooth path (cf. 272bc). The metaphor of *methodos*, 'method' or 'pursuit', reinforces the image of the journey to and around the world of the Forms.<sup>73</sup> During the discussion we are told that Lysias and Thrasymakhos pursue the art of rhetoric in the wrong way: 'I think that the method is not the one Lysias and Thrasymakhos pursue (οὐχ ἡ Λυσίας τε καὶ Θρασύμαχος πορεύεται δοκεῖ μοι φαίνεσθαι ἡ μέθοδος, 269d7–8). Lysias has chosen the wrong path and thus can never arrive. The *methodos* that does not include collection and division 'is like the path of a blind man' (270d9–e1). The true orator is pre-eminently sighted since he has walked the dialectical path and had a vision of the Forms. The circular road is common to the myth and the second part of the dialogue, but what is reality in one is metaphor in the other.

The creation of a metaphor out of the second speech's mythic reality can also be seen in Sokrates' prescription for scientific knowledge: all great sciences need 'chatter and discussion of heavenly phenomena' (270a1). Conversation about high matters is the earthly counterpart of what happens to the soul in heaven as its wings lift it up (cf. 246d6–7). In our incarnate state we can only discuss what we then lived, yet dialectic

<sup>72</sup> Ferrari 1987: 120.

<sup>73</sup> Robinson 1941: 71 argues that *μέθοδος* never had a predominantly physical sense in any author, and thus that the term in Plato is always technical. Yet as Friedländer points out [1954]/1958: 17, the Greeks may have been more sensitive than we are to the sensuous meanings of language.



does help us to recover some of that experience by directing our thoughts to lofty things (269e4–270a3). The educational relationship between Perikles and Anaxagoras is described in terms which recall the lovers of the myth. Particularly notable is the description of Perikles falling upon his teacher (270a3–6). Perikles plays the role of the lover inspired by desire and in his hot pursuit of educational excellence he reminds us of Sokrates, who declared that he was a lover of collections and divisions, and that he followed the dialectician who practised this method as if he were a god (266b3–7). In these two cases the lover is placed in a position of intellectual inferiority, a dynamic which reverses the standard paederastic relationship, but which is understandable after the teaching of the myth. A lover is attracted to something in the beloved which is superior to him, namely, the beauty which recalls the Form, and the similarity to the patron god the lover followed in his non-corporeal existence.<sup>74</sup>

These reminiscences return us to the theme of likeness. The theme appears in two guises during Sokrates' discussion of rhetoric, firstly as similarity (ὁμοιότης), and secondly as *eikos*, the plausible, or that which seems to resemble the truth. The science of rhetoric is defined as that art which produces all possible resemblances and is able to uncover resemblances which were hidden, 'likening everything to everything' (261e3). If the orator is to deceive, he must be able to distinguish the 'similarity and dissimilarity of the things that are' (262a6). *Eikos*, the topos so beloved of Greek oratory, is in fact a species of similarity: 'this plausibility (εἰκός) is engendered in most people through a similarity to the truth' (273d3–4). The corollary of this definition is that the man who knows the truth can produce the best likenesses, and this makes nonsense of the objections that one should pay attention not to the truth, but only to plausibility, on the grounds that the latter is more persuasive (267a6–7 and 272d7–e2).

The language that characterises rhetorical deception is 'erotic' and echoes the situation of the mythical lovers. Deception arises most easily when one can slide gradually from one definition to another. In order to deceive efficiently, the speaker must be able to distinguish likeness from non-likeness (262a2–7). When one is deceived, 'it is clear that this experience streams in (εἰσερρύη) through likenesses' (262b3). Deception, like love, is liquid: it flows in. The lover's experience, like the auditor's, is a matter of effluences which stream from likenesses (in his case, like-

<sup>74</sup> Compare the account of the ascent of the soul at *Symp.* 210–11.

nesses of beauty). The orator creates a source of experience for his audience; he represents the Forms for them. Unlike the passive audience of an orator, however, the lover creates likenesses in turn as he modifies the beloved to make him more like his god, and the beloved also ends by becoming active. If we project this behaviour onto the proper relationship of a speaker and his audience, we have dialectical conversation where both partners take an active part. The erotic relationship in the myth, rooted in the Forms, serves as a model for a relationship in discourse that has the same basis. Both reach the Forms through the creation and examination of likenesses.

The role of memory in the second part of the dialogue is closely connected with written rhetoric. The myth of Theuth (274c5–275b2) presents the relationship of writing to memory: the Egyptian god Theuth discovers writing and presents it to his superior Thamos for approval and comment. Theuth claims that writing is a ‘charm for memory and wisdom’ which will make the Egyptians have better memories (274e4–7). Thamos disagrees; writing will rather create forgetfulness, and people will neglect their memories because they will trust in outside sources for their knowledge instead of using their own powers of recollection (ἀναμνησκομένους, 275a4–5). The wisdom writing provides is apparent, not real, since it can only remind one of what one already knows. The conclusion drawn from this myth is the primacy of spoken discourse; written speeches are only an ‘image’ of living speech (εἰδωλον, 276a9). Only conversation can produce fruitful thought and thus create the philosopher. The themes of memory and likeness unite here and mirror the significance they had in Sokrates’ second speech. It may have seemed at first that they were being treated on a very mundane level in the discussion of rhetoric: likeness was a tool, and memory a precondition, of oratory. Their real function, however, is to enable us to see the truth, and it is to this end that the philosophical orator uses them. Memory is our best means of access to the Forms and imitation is our means for keeping ourselves in proximity to them. The orator who observes resemblances is analogous to the lover who recognises imitations of the Forms in earthly things. If he uses his discernment morally, like the good lover, he will become the philosopher who creates likenesses of the truth in the person with whom he associates. If his knowledge is scientific, he will be employing conscious recollection as a rhetorical art, utilising the powers of recollection inside himself and not relying on written discourse.

Sokrates' assessment of his own myth is disingenuous, therefore. He summarises: 'we made in some way an image (ἀπεικάζοντες) of the experience of love. Maybe we grasped some truth; maybe we were carried off course (παράφερόμενοι), but we did compose a narrative that was not wholly incredible' (265b6–8). Most of the 'mythical hymn' (265c1) to love was really a game (265c8–9; cf. 265c1). The speech was play and was important only for its shadowy adumbration of dialectical methodology. This hedging of the truth status of the myth should by now be familiar. Play can be serious, and image-making can be philosophically informed. If the speech was persuasive, then, by Sokrates' own criteria for good oratory, he must in some way have known the truth of what he spoke. This assumption is strengthened by Sokrates' characterisation of the speeches at 262d1 as examples of how one who knows the truth can lead his audience on. It is also notable that even where Sokrates comments on the methodology of the speech, he admits that he does not know whether his definition of love was correct (265d6). This admission has the effect of lessening the gulf between myth and strict rationalism.

How can Sokrates have delivered a speech that seems to exemplify scientific rhetoric, but have been inspired when he delivered it? This paradox parallels my earlier suggestion that there are two sequentially related forms of recollection, intuitive and scientific. The science of dialectic and the madness of mythical intuition both converge in the investigation of discourse as the image of thought. Dialectic is the divine and long road to accurate discourse, and myth is the short and human one. Dialectic is the product of long-term conscious recollection (the education of the lovers and the philosophical orator), and myth the product of instantaneous and intuitive recollection (that is, it is the result of Sokrates' inspired insight into the truth about the soul). Both produce speech which is an image of reality. It is the task of science to give a rational account of insight, and this is what happens in the dialogue as the myth is reworked in the discussion of rhetoric. Myth is inextricably bound to our human existence, but it is not to be despised, since without it we would have no preliminary conception of reality to subject to rational examination. Thus in his speech, Sokrates reveals the truth which shapes the later discussion; his skill was intuitive and required scrutiny. Yet dialectic too, as has been shown, is the image of an activity, not the reality itself. It places the philosopher close to the Forms in memory but not in actuality. He too, therefore, must form images with his memory, although his are likely to be more accurate.

*Myth, poetry, and philosophy*

The opposition between inspiration/intuition and strict art (*techné*) also informs the relationship between poetry and philosophy.<sup>75</sup> In this final section, I shall examine the discursive continuum that stretches between poetry, oratory, and philosophy in terms of this opposition. Writing and speaking well depends on methodological self-consciousness and commitment to truth. Such commitment means that speaking and writing are never ethically neutral activities. The topoi of poetry and rhetoric take on meaning only when harnessed to a discursive goal. The flexibility and proliferation of interpretation that was so essential in the non-philosophical use of such topoi is ethically problematic. The place of myth in this continuum is not fixed and is subject to continual renegotiation.

The myth of the cicadas (258e6–259d8) implies that philosophy is related to the performance arts of dancing and love poetry, and that it is the highest form of a kind of performance which embraces all varieties of discourse. The cicadas report to the Muses which mortals honour which Muses. Philosophers are reported to Kalliope and Ourania, the Muses concerned most with heaven and with speeches both human and divine (259c2–d7). The implication is that, as in the *Phaedo*, philosophy and its performance are a musical phenomenon. Like the myth of the charioteer, the myth of the cicadas divides people into classes according to the object of their desire. The former deals with our relationship to the world of the Forms. The latter is concerned with how one gives formal expression to one's life choice: with dancing, erotic discourse, or philosophical performance. It presents a division of the categories of discourse (according to Muse), but one's 'musical' choice is analogous to one's choice of lifestyle and is closely related to the hierarchy of lives in the palinode. Writing or speaking well or badly is fundamentally the same sort of thing as loving, and living, well or badly. It is impossible to divorce formal expression from spiritual content.<sup>76</sup> Discourse is never neutral but is used towards some end.

The importance of formal expression is even more marked because of the rhetorical importance of the creation of likenesses. Discourse is the production of resemblances, whether of physical objects or of concepts. On a more sophisticated level, artful discourse or persuasion is also

<sup>75</sup> For relevance to the contemporary debate on the relative worth of extempore and pre-composed speechmaking, see O'Sullivan 1992: 42–62.

<sup>76</sup> Compare Ferrari 1987: 5.

based upon making a likeness. In the metaphysical realm, the welfare of the soul depends entirely on its ability to perceive successfully likenesses of the Forms. Sokrates is correct when he asserts that the art of speaking is not just applicable in the law-courts, but affects every aspect of human life (261a7–b1). One of philosophy's central concerns is what is like, or unlike, something else. Zeno, who convinced his audience that the same things were both similar and dissimilar, one and many (261d6–8), is a perfect example of the philosophical importance of being able to distinguish likenesses. On the ethical level, this problem is formulated as the question of what image we should take as our model.

Poetry goes wrong because it cannot give us a method for the selection of a moral paradigm. Sokrates' first speech and the sources he cites for it function as a model for what Plato sees as the poetic process as currently practised. Sokrates states both that he is inspired and that he is working within a tradition of erotic speech developed by Sappho and Anakreon.<sup>77</sup> This mixture of inspiration and reworking of traditional material is characteristic of the Greek poetic tradition and doubly determines the content of any poetic utterance. The drawback of this tradition, however, is that it usually does not question its own method (at least as far as Plato is concerned). In the *Ion*, Plato suggests that poetry cannot give a rational account of its own knowledge.<sup>78</sup> Even Sokrates' second speech could not do that without the aid of dialectic, but it is a step in the right direction since it is a palinode, a product of reflection on poetic propriety. The second speech is a model for a new creative poetic process: inspired, reflective, recollective. We may usefully apply to it Sokrates' comments on creativity. When criticising a discourse, Sokrates says, one should look both at necessary and unnecessary arguments. In the case of necessary or obvious arguments, one should praise not the inventiveness (*εὐρεσις*) of the author but the way he arranges his material (*διόθεσις*). Only in the case of unnecessary arguments is it appropriate to praise both invention and disposition (235e5–236a6). Sokrates' first speech concentrates on proper arrangement; its content is entirely predictable (241e5–6). Only the palinode has both invention and good arrangement. Sokrates' invented myth shows that the philosophical usefulness of the poetic tradition has been exhausted. This is not because all possible mythical variants have been used up, but because the complex tradition is too equivocal: it allows for a distressing multiplicity of interpretation.

<sup>77</sup> For allusions to Sappho and Anakreon in Sokrates' speeches, see Fortenbaugh 1966.

<sup>78</sup> For a similar discussion of the place of intuition, recollection, and inspiration in the dialogue, see Carter 1967.

This becomes clearer if one considers the role assigned to Sappho and Anacreon, the sources for Sokrates' first speech (235c). One might feel that it is unfair of Plato to associate them with the ignoble motivations of the non-lover. When Sappho and Anacreon write of the madness of love, they do not do so to condemn it as irrational and base. Their value for the non-loving speaker lies in their portrayal of the torments of love, but this theme must be removed from its original context in order to work successfully in the argument against love. Conversely, when Sokrates describes love in the palinode, Sappho's sweats and dizziness are transformed into the symptoms of the growing of the soul's wings (251a6–b4). The authority of previous poets may be used on either side of the debate.<sup>79</sup> The content of their poetry is value neutral, and has become a 'necessary argument', which gains value only in the context of a new arrangement. The poetic tradition is the fodder which clever speakers feed to their rhetorical black horses.<sup>80</sup> What is true of poetic narrative is doubly true of the mythological tradition the poets employ. Pre-existing myths are necessary arguments, endowed with value by context. They lead to many different interpretations, but this means that the mythological tradition is too complex and multiform to be useful for philosophical purposes.

If there is no value inherent in previous mythological accounts, they are dead discourse – a fatal disadvantage in the world of the *Phaedrus*. They are like the written accounts that drift around being misused by those that have no business with them (275de). The only solution is to use a myth in such a way that its value is inherent, by inventing it and bringing its value to the surface. It would not then be in need of resurrection by allegory, rationalisation, or a particular poetic occasion. Such is the myth of the charioteer, which does not have to be interpreted as being about the soul because this is its primary denotation. This simplicity makes the myth an ideal paedagogic and philosophical tool. It directs its own application in the soul of the hearer, but as a simile it qualifies itself and cautions against blind acceptance.

The difference between poetic and philosophical myth is also reflected in the differing inspirations for Sokrates' two speeches. Sokrates claims some kind of poetic inspiration as he introduces his first speech with an invocation to the Muses. As he pauses during the speech he depicts himself as almost possessed by the nymphs and verging on dithyrambs (238d1–3, cf. 241e1–5). In his later analysis, he emphasises

<sup>79</sup> Rowe 1986b: 151 sees Plato's hostility to the poets here taking a different form: by portraying irrational desire as they do, the love-poets argue on the side of the non-lover.

<sup>80</sup> As we see again in the treatment of Simonides in the *Protagoras* (339–348a).

that the palinode was a product of inspiration and must later ask Phaidros whether he defined love in it, for he has no memory of it due to his possession (262d2–6; 263d1–3). Both of Sokrates' speeches, therefore, were inspired, but the inspiration experienced in the first speech was far less congenial to him than that in the second. It has been remarked that the inspiration which leads to Sokrates' first speech is linked to forgetfulness of self as opposed to self-awareness. It is imposed from outside and leads astray, while the inspiration of the palinode comes from the inside and leads to restraint.<sup>81</sup> This contrast arises from the fact that Sokrates' first speech was on a set topic, while the second was on a topic of his own choosing. Inspiration is useless when it is merely artifice and is unauthorised by contact with the realm of truth. It must be informed by self-examination and grounded in an ethical life. It cannot take itself for granted. Philosophical inspiration is a type of intuition that borders on recollection.

Traditional poetic inspiration lacks the element of self-conscious analysis; it is not *science*.<sup>82</sup> Scientific knowledge of discursive technique is, of course, what the sophists and speechwriters promise. This promise entrances Phaidros, but it is an empty one, since the sophists cannot ground their rules in the truth. The mythical discourse of Sokrates' second speech is somewhat related to the thoughtless rhetoric of the professional speakers. Neither Sokrates nor the orators have scientific knowledge, but while the myth of the charioteer is justified by its reasoned metaphysical base and the ensuing formulation of dialectic, the tools of the orator remain unredeemed. The orators care only for what is persuasive and not for what is true; thus they make their claim to art (272d7–e2). The myth is persuasive and so is the speech of the orators, but while they claim skill (*technē*), Sokrates confesses that he was only playing. The rhetoricians' mistake lies in taking the playful level of discourse to be the scientific one, but this level will remain unfulfilled when ungrounded in science. As a philosopher Sokrates has already begun the process of conscious recollection. This means that his skill in creating likenesses is greater than theirs and more grounded in the Forms. His greater self-consciousness entails a greater presence in his speech of the elements of science; hence the presence in the palinode of philosophical tools of analysis such as collection and division. If one can apply these with *technē*, it is a good thing (265c8–d1). Sokrates' first two speeches did not apply the procedure methodically but under the

<sup>81</sup> Griswold 1986: 54; Burger 1980: 33; Ferrari 1987: 110.

<sup>82</sup> Burger 1980: 81.

influence of inspiration, albeit 'recollective' inspiration. This leads to the circumstance that has irritated some commentators, that Sokrates' reconstruction of the operation of collection and division in the earlier speeches does not correspond to the way it actually occurred.<sup>83</sup> But how could it? In the discussion, Sokrates is proceeding scientifically, but in the speeches method was present only 'by chance' (265c9) and could not be systematically developed.

We have traced a movement from an external inspiration which does not imply truthful content, to an internal one which intuits the truth and is associated with recollection, to a scientific analysis which fulfils and provides the grounding for the vision of truth presented by the myth. Further, it points the way to an intellectualised recollection which is not dependent on uncontrolled visions of the images of the Forms. Yet all the varieties of inspiration and rhetorical delivery, the content of the myth, the discussion of rhetoric (278b7), any written discourse (276b5) are play, a game. So too, on the level of the dialogue, are verbal, thematic, and imagistic echoes. And that is as it should be. We are not to forget that the Platonic dialogue is a representation. Its artful construction reminds us of that fact. This is why the myth of the charioteer is representative of Platonic writing.<sup>84</sup> Its elaboration is an intensification of qualities that are characteristically Platonic. The dialogues are a product of Plato's own 'musical' inspiration, constructed on a basis of reasoned argument. Like the myth, they are images which intimate, but are not identical with, reality. Myth, as a discourse which calls attention to its own literal falsity, works supremely well in the *Phaedrus* as a self-qualifying discourse which expresses the intuitive nature of recollection and the limits of such intuition.<sup>85</sup> But by becoming an analogue to the Platonic dialogue it draws attention to the literary impossibility of capturing the philosophical quest.

We have seen how the myth of the charioteer is a symbolic prediction of dialectical method and how it starts the process of logical analysis in the second part of the dialogue. Myth has, therefore, an association with the hypotheses that must be subjected to rational enquiry at the beginning of the philosophical enterprise.<sup>86</sup> We have also seen, however, that

<sup>83</sup> Griswold 1986: 179; Ferrari 1987: 59.

<sup>84</sup> Rowe 1986a: 113–17 comments rightly (116) that the playful nature of *mythos* 'is peculiarly fitted to illustrate the final lessons of the dialogue'.

<sup>85</sup> For Sinaiko 1965, myth is appropriate for the portrayal of the experiences of the soul since language itself cannot express directly the experience being described. In the myth, at least, the distortion is explicit (65).

<sup>86</sup> Compare Sokrates' use of hypotheses in *Phd.* 99d–e.



in other dialogues mythological presentation comes at the end of the philosophical task, after the process of analysis which gives it its ground. In this context, myth has connections with the leap of philosophical insight described in the *Seventh Letter*. This insight clothes itself in a mythological form, and rightly so, since the insight which is a result of contemplation of the Forms can hardly be expressed in language. What it can do, however, is guide further discussion and lead others to the same discovery. The discussion of dialectic is the first step on this path. The nature of love and the soul cannot immediately be subject to logical analysis; that is a long and divine task, and first the speakers must determine the correct way to speak about anything at all (the path of dialectic). Thus the shift away from love as subject matter is accounted for by the necessity to become equipped with the proper intellectual tools for discussing it.<sup>87</sup> The myth of the charioteer is thus both a protreptic (for Phaidros) and a token of philosophical progress (for Sokrates).

All the myths of the soul discussed in this chapter extend philosophical speculation into the realm of the unseen. They all presume the immortality of the soul, and in three out of the four cases, this immortality is formally argued for. They all stress the uncertainty and provisionality of the account and thus call attention to their questionable truth status. They all direct our focus to the nature of their integration in a philosophical account. But whereas the myths of the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* militantly assert and parade their ties to the argument, the myth of the *Phaedrus*, despite its implication in the themes and argumentative strategies of the dialogue, is ironically and disingenuously marginalised. This occurs partly, as we have seen, to dramatise the contrast between unconscious and conscious recollection and method. It also mirrors the shifting boundaries between play and seriousness that operate in the realm of philosophical discussion. Most important, however, is the *Phaedrus*' concentration on the question of how we should speak and write, on rhetoric in the casual and in the philosophical sphere. This

<sup>87</sup> It is beyond the scope of the present study to address fully the problem of the unity of the *Phaedrus* (the subject of a debate between Rowe 1986a, 1989 and Heath 1989a, 1989b). Rowe argues that the second speech is an example of rhetoric, Heath that it is an example of philosophy. The myth is indeed philosophically based rhetoric (as Rowe argues (1989: 179)). It does not teach and analyse as strict philosophy demands, but leads to these things, or rather, it starts an examination of methodology that eventually leads to a rational analysis of the nature of the soul and love. The role of context is again crucial. As a set piece and divorced from a philosophical context, the speech tends towards the purely rhetorical. To the extent that it fails to teach Phaidros and excite questioning, its philosophical status is undermined (Rowe 1989: 186–7). To the extent that it excites methodological speculation, it is philosophical.

makes the myth of the *Phaedrus* paradigmatic and central in a way that none of the other myths of the soul are. We take it seriously to the extent that we take the Platonic dialogue seriously, but we are meant to realise that both pale in significance with philosophical discourse written in the soul.<sup>88</sup>

In the early and middle dialogues, Sokrates seems to have access to ethical truths that are not accessible to his interlocutors. In light of the above analysis of the *Phaedrus* we may connect Sokrates' *daimonion* with his recollective intuition. Sokrates seems to 'know' certain things as items of religious faith, and these beliefs intrude early in the *Phaedo* and *Gorgias*, although they are forestalled in the *Republic*. They must be withdrawn until they can be justified by argument. In the *Phaedrus*, for the first time, Sokrates discounts his intuitive truth himself. This does not make it any the less (potentially) true, but it does mark a transition in terms of self-conscious philosophical method that corresponds to the introduction of collection and division into the Platonic arsenal. Sokrates must now focus his philosophical vision from the afterlife of the soul to a formulation of conditions for correct discourse. The *Phaedrus* specifies an attitude towards writing and speech that will inform the examination of the conditions for knowledge and enquiry in the later dialogues. The penetration of dialectical method into Sokrates' myth is a turning point that looks forward to the way myth is used in the *Statesman*, to illustrate and illumine the application of collection and division, or even to the *Timaeus*, where the 'likely account' and the construction of a probabilistic cosmology comprise an indistinguishable mixture of myth and argument. The mixture of philosophical modes in the second speech, ranging from proof (immortality) to a hypothetical theory of knowledge that may or may not be meant to be taken literally (recollection), to an exemplification of a new method (collection and division), also anticipates the continuum of discursive modes to be found in the later dialogues, where philosophical theory and practice slide in and out of the realm of the mythical.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Rowe 1986a; 1989.

## CHAPTER 8

### *Plato: myth and theory*

The analysis of the previous chapter suggested that myth in the middle dialogues expresses a synoptic view of reality. Myth extrapolates from the particulars of philosophical discussion and produces a narrative we might call ‘collective’ (or ‘recollective’). The philosopher’s devotion to dialectic and to the examination of the grounds of his knowledge renders him capable of an intuitive leap to a vision of the soul separated from its body and related to the whole. The mythological vision is a self-qualifying image of the truth expressed in narrative. This intuitive understanding cannot stand by itself, however; it arose in the first place from dialectic and must return to dialectic to ground itself.

This final chapter on Plato will examine how the treatment of myth in the late dialogues takes this vision in a different direction. This is not to say that synoptic myths do not occur in the late period. The cosmologies of the *Statesman* and the *Timaeus* are universalising, albeit incomplete, accounts of the world from a transcendental perspective.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the relationship of these accounts to the context of the dialogue in which they are set differs from the middle period. Instead of being a philosophically intuitive leap, they are firmly integrated into a framework of analytic method and methodology. Thus the cosmology of the *Timaeus* is an exercise in structured scientific and philosophical inference, while the cosmology of the *Statesman* is intended to help clarify a potential error in the dialectic process. The methodological focus of most of the late dialogues is an important key to understanding Plato’s use of myth in this period.

‘Recollective’ myth proves inadequate to the needs of late-period dialectic. Many of the late dialogues engage in specialised analysis of the grounds of knowledge. The nature of unity, false statement, knowledge

<sup>1</sup> Lane 1998: 124–5 notes the shift in emphasis from ethics to method in the paradigms and myth of the *Statesman*. This chapter will not consider the cosmology in *Laws* 10, since it is ‘paramythic’ and didactic.

itself becomes the focus of dialectic. The philosophical experts who conduct most of these discussions encourage an analytic procedure that often moves from the great to the small. Clearly, then, the synoptic myth of the middle period moves in the wrong direction. Specialised method is not interested in broad strokes; large-scale myths do not, in themselves, assist the acquisition of expertise in the grounds of knowledge. Nevertheless, neither myths nor *mythos*-vocabulary are absent from the late dialogues. The educational, socialising use of myth is retained: hence the myth of Atlantis in the *Timaeus* and *Critias*, and the 'para-mythic' preambles of the *Laws*.

Even more important, however, is that the use of myth to provoke questions about the status of an account is taken further than in the middle dialogues. We have seen how argumentative context plays a crucial role in specifying whether an account is a *mythos*. The self-qualification of middle-period myths reminded us of the limits of human language and knowledge. *Mythos* vocabulary in the late period brings up similar questions of how we construct, or forestall, analysis. Examination of this vocabulary will show that even philosophical theory can be called a *mythos*. Applying this name stresses that philosophical analysis is a socially-embedded construct, and this in turn reminds us of the early use of *mythos* described in Chapter 2: *mythos* as positively-marked, authoritative speech. We have seen that this marking came to represent societal aspirations and consensus. As philosophy came into its own, it appropriated this authority, but the philosophers studied in this book never allow their audience to forget that even their own accounts arise out of the sensible world and are circumscribed by the limits of language. Plato, the culmination of this tradition, is aware that the more authoritative and convincing the account, the greater the danger that the dynamic interaction at the heart of philosophy will be lost. Calling a theory a *mythos* draws attention to its existence as a constructed quasi-narrative with societal and literary implications. Eleatic or Protagorean *mythoi* threaten to forestall questioning and analysis. *Timaeus'* cosmology is founded on the assumption of a beneficent deity. At best, these narratives are 'likely accounts', at worst, they tyrannise the intellect with an unjustified impression of knowledge. The best account is still inescapably a *mythos* because of human frailty and the instability of language. Awareness of this saves both our souls and our intellectual integrity.

This chapter begins with a brief glance at the digression on the philosophical life in the *Theaetetus*, which helps to specify the nature of

and reasons for the transition from middle-period to late-period myth. I then approach the larger topic of myth as theory by looking at the practice of mythological analogy and role-playing (dealt with in Chapters 5 and 6). Whereas the sophists and Plato in the early and middle period used mythological role-playing as a way of commenting on the ethics of a teacher and assimilating him to the heroes of the past, in the late period this practice has the added dimension that the heroic struggles referred to are assimilated to philosophical controversies. *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus* provide further evidence of the assimilation of philosophical theory to myth. The bulk of the chapter is taken up by three case studies. The cosmology of the *Statesman* illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of myth as a paradigm in analysis. The myth of Atlantis in the *Timaeus* and *Critias* demonstrates the mechanisms through which philosophically-constructed myth transforms into history, further confounding already insecure boundaries between *mythos* and *logos*. Timaios' account of the creation of the universe, while based on different principles, crosses those same boundaries and allows us to perceive a link between such permeability and the weakness of language. Finally, I shall close my investigation by exploring the emblematic qualities of the Platonic topos of 'saving the *mythos*'.

#### THE PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE AND ITS MYTHOLOGICAL BATTLES

An instructive passage in the *Theaetetus*, where Sokrates *fails* to tell a myth, helps to illuminate some of the differences between middle- and late-period usage. In the famous digression on the philosophical life (171c–177d), Sokrates contrasts the truly leisured and free man (the philosopher) with the slavish man active in the political life of the city.<sup>2</sup> Sokrates twice alludes to the teleological myths and 'old wives' tales' familiar to us from the middle-period dialogues. At 176ab, Sokrates argues that that man is happiest who is most like god. It is not easy, however, to persuade the many of this. They think that one should shun wickedness for the sake of a good reputation, but these considerations are, in Sokrates' opinion 'old wives' tales' (ὁ λεγόμενος γραῶν ὄθλος 176b6–7). A little later Sokrates relates the penalty of the unjust life. First, the unjust man is unhappy, and second, when he dies he will not be received in a place free of evils (176e3–177a8). This second consideration is introduced as a conditional: if the unjust man hears this, he will think

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Nightingale 1995: 50–9.

that he is listening to fools. Sokrates does not expand on the details of the place free of evils, but commentators aptly cite the teleological myths of the *Republic* and *Phaedo*. Why doesn't Sokrates tell the myth?

We can best answer this question by exploring a parallel with the *Gorgias*, noted by Campbell.<sup>3</sup> As we have seen, the myths of the *Gorgias*, *Republic* and *Phaedo* promise a blissful afterlife to the virtuous. In the *Gorgias*, the myth is set in a context that, like the *Theaetetus*, juxtaposes the unworldly philosopher (Sokrates) with the unscrupulous politician (Kallikles). In the *Gorgias*, moreover, the myth is concluded by a reference to 'old wives' tales' (527a5). But the content applied to the label 'old wives' tales' is reversed. In the *Gorgias*, the phrase refers to the reward of virtue in the afterlife; in the *Theaetetus*, to the pursuit of reputation in this life. Kallikles and Sokrates thus have diametrically opposed visions of popular fantasy; the reference to the fools who purvey tales of afterworld justice recalls the Kalliklean perspective. In the *Theaetetus*, however, the discursive context has changed. As Sayre has pointed out, the main interlocutors in the methodological dialogues are philosophical neophytes who need to learn how to conduct a discussion.<sup>4</sup> The respondents in the earlier dialogues are more practised and show some resistance to teleological considerations. Simmias and Kebes in the *Phaedo* doubt that immortality can be proved at all. Glaukon and Adeimantos in the *Republic* demand that justice be shown to be desirable for its own sake, rather than for any hope of post-mortem reward. Kallikles is hostile to old wives' tales about the afterlife, and Phaidros must be converted from his worldly superficiality. The philosophical beginners in the late dialogues concentrate their energies on the argument itself. When the question of the fate of the soul arises in the *Theaetetus*, it does so during the interaction of Sokrates and the older mathematician, Theodoros, who finds talk along these lines more congenial than the hard work of analysing Protagorean relativity (177c3–5), and abandons it only with reluctance. This begins to give us our answer. Sokrates always takes the path of greatest resistance. Some respondents need to be oriented to teleology, some to methodology. The *Theaetetus* recalls and reverses the *Gorgias* because of the predispositions of the interlocutors. This brings us to a second observation. Plato has concentrated on certain themes in the late dialogues in such a way that teleological myth is no longer required. The stress on methodology, particularly on collection and division, marks a change in focus.

<sup>3</sup> Campbell 1861: 128, 130; McDowell 1973: 175.

<sup>4</sup> Sayre 1992: 221.

Even as the importance of teleological myth diminishes, the importance of myth as a metaphor for philosophical theory and argument increases. We can see this first in the deepening of mythological role-playing. We have already seen how the sophists cast themselves, and Plato casts Sokrates, in the role of mythological heroes such as Herakles, Nestor, or Prometheus in order to make an ethical statement. Are they valiant, wise, foresightful? In a few instances in the later dialogues, this practice is resumed, but this time mythical is assimilated to philosophical narrative. At *Tht.* 169ab Theodoros compares the unrelenting Sokrates to Skiron and Antaios, who force passers-by into a trial of strength (in this case, the defence of the Protagorean man-measure doctrine). The comparison is ironic and doubly allusive. Theodoros implies that, like Skiron, Sokrates inveigles his victim into a seemingly harmless task, like washing feet or examining the compass of Protagorean relativity in his own speciality of mathematics ('press on a little way', says Sokrates 169a1–2), but then plans an ambush. Skiron kicked his victims over a cliff; Sokrates' attack will be more dialectical. Theodoros seems aware that his championing of Protagorean relativism is on the cliff's edge.

Antaios was the giant who defeated all comers in wrestling until conquered by Herakles, who held him off the earth from which he derived his strength. From Theodoros' point of view Sokrates is an almost unstoppable dialectical wrestler. Sokrates' ironically modest response implies that, although he may sometimes meet with defeat, these setbacks are not permanent. He is more stubborn (169b6) than either Skiron or Antaios and the victories won by an aspiring eristic Herakles or Theseus are illusory. Like Antaios, Sokrates can ground himself (in the safety and security of method) and regain his strength. At the same time, the reader wonders how accurate it is to cast Sokrates in the role of mythological villain. Deceitful Megarian brigands and earthbound wrestlers would more naturally remind us of sophistic opponents, challenged by the heroic philosopher. And in fact, Plato more frequently casts Sokrates in the Heraklean role.<sup>5</sup> Theodoros' (mis?)application of the paradigm may invite us to ponder the intricacies of philosophical 'aggression' in the dialogue (cf. 151b–d).

<sup>5</sup> See *Soph.* 240c and *Euthd.* 297bc for the hydra-headed sophist. Loraux 1985 discusses the ambivalence of the Herakles paradigm and Platonic influence on the development of a 'philosophic' Herakles. For an analysis of the Herakles paradigm in the *Euthydemus*, see Jackson 1990. Plato later makes Antaios the originator of wrestling tricks that arise out of a useless love of victory (*Leg.* 796a1–4): a good analogy for the contentious wrangling of the sophists.

A second example is the Battle of the Gods and Giants at *Soph.* 246a–c. Here, a quarrel about the nature of reality is compared to a Gigantomachy (246a4). The giants define reality as body; they are always trying to drag everything down to earth. The gods maintain that true reality consists of intelligible and unseen forms. The two sides are always engaged in battle. After discussing the two positions, the Stranger concludes that they must ask that reality be both unchangeable and in change. This analogy captures nicely the ethereal concerns of those who believe in the Forms and the interests of the materialists. The Stranger's solution (that heavenly and earthly concerns must, in some sense, coexist) may reflect the confusion of heaven and earth that is the natural aftermath of apocalyptic battles (so *Theog.* 690–710).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the immensity and interminability of the battle (246c3) may imply that it is incapable of resolution if it continues to be fought on the same terms. As with the Antaios analogy above, we are invited to ponder the extent to which the analogy is correctly applied. The mythological battle had a termination (the victory of the gods), but what is needed in philosophical terms is a truce.<sup>7</sup> There may even be an implication that the combatants are employing antiquated (mythological?) thinking.

These passages challenge the reader to assess the appropriateness of mythological paradigms, but they also displace doctrinal and methodological struggles into the world of myth in a way we have not seen previously. The struggles of Skiron and Antaios are struggles over the validity of Protagorean relativism. The Gigantomachy pits materialism against idealism. In one further example, the accomplishment of 'some Prometheus' is assimilated to dialectical method. This occurs at *Phlb.* 16–17, where Sokrates' solution to a threatened methodological impasse is collection and division. The skill was, he says, 'cast down from some divine source, together with a very bright fire, by the agency of some Prometheus as a gift of the gods to men. The ancients, who were better than we are and lived closer to the gods, handed it down as a tradition'

<sup>6</sup> The representation of the Gigantomachy on the inside of the shield of the statue of Athena Parthenos on the Akropolis provides a model for the battle closer to Plato than the *Theogony*. A series of Red-Figure portrayals of the battle (starting in the 420s) may be influenced by the shield, and show the Olympians aiming their missiles downwards, while the Giants hurl large boulders and attempt to climb Mt Olympos (Gantz 1993: 452–3).

<sup>7</sup> One central element of the Gigantomachy in Greek art is the presence of Herakles, whose help was necessary for the gods to win. Why has Plato portrayed as interminable a battle that had a well-known hero and ended in divine victory? If Sokrates is a philosophical Herakles, perhaps his absence from the discussion of the *Sophist* is the reason that nobody can successfully come to the aid of the Forms and win the victory for the side of the gods.



(16c5–8; cf. 16e3–17a2). Sokrates wants to place himself in a long tradition of thinkers. This seems a little startling; when collection and division is introduced in the *Phaedrus* (266b), there is no indication of its being a traditional method handed down from a divine source. Moreover, the appeal to tradition as authority for the method is the same move that Sokrates of the middle period makes in introducing a myth, denying an authorship which is, almost transparently, his own.<sup>8</sup> The move distances us from the method and makes us question the status of our belief in dialectic. The efficacy of the method depends upon the presumption that the universe is rationally ordered. It is the same ‘predecessors’ who pass down the method from antiquity and insist that intelligence governs the universe (28de). This is, after all, only a presumption, as Sokrates realises; this is why he calls it ‘sharing the risk’ (29a2).<sup>9</sup> The belief in a rational universe gives comprehensible philosophical results, but it is also an act of faith. Structuring the introduction of the method like a myth brings this tension to the surface.

The specification of ‘some Prometheus’ as the agent through whom collection and division were communicated to mankind is noteworthy. The mention of Prometheus recalls the Titan’s championship of man in the face of the gods’ jealousy, and his theft of fire. As we might expect from the strictures of the *Republic* (379cd), the older version is ‘corrected’, since Socratic mythology has no place for gods who denied fire or any other good to man, nor for a being who defied the gods. Thus Prometheus loses his prominence as champion, and the gods send as a gift not only fire, but the intellectual wherewithal to make sense of the world (16c2–3).<sup>10</sup> To the extent that we glimpse Sokrates behind Prometheus (in spite of his demurs), we remain in the tradition of mythological role-playing already examined. But now the philosophical content of the myth matches its characters. The gift of the gods is philosophical method, and we must assign to this method and to the ordered universe it presupposes the cultural authority previously given to myth, while still remembering the contingency of such authority.

<sup>8</sup> No judgement is made here about whether the real Sokrates practised collection and division. For denial of authorship, see *Phdr.* 235cd (attribution of his first speech to an external source); 243a–244a (attribution of mode of mythological purification and the second speech to Stesikhoros); *Symp.* 201d (attribution of his great speech to Diotima). At *Philebus* 20b6–9, Sokrates attributes the suggestion that pleasure and intelligence are non-identical with the good to ‘certain *logoi* that I heard a long time ago in a dream – or maybe even awake’.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Phd.* 114d4–6.

<sup>10</sup> The differences from Hesiod are striking. At *Works and Days* 57 Zeus gives man an evil (Pandora) in exchange for fire. In the *Philebus*, method is a gift *along with* fire. Plato recasts the separation of gods and men in Hesiod as the closeness of the men of that time to the gods.

## MYTHOS AND THEORY

In the previous section we saw that the use of mythological analogy to describe the existence and clash of philosophical ideas foregrounded the possibility that theories could be described in terms of myth. This is confirmed by an examination of *mythos*-vocabulary in the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus*. There is some precedent for the use of *mythos* to refer to philosophical theory. At *Phdr.* 241, after the conclusion to his erroneous first speech on love, Sokrates calls it first a *logos* (241d3) and then a *mythos* (241e8). The content of the speech was, we recall, not mythological but attempted to be an exposé of the dangers of love, based on a technical definition. Sokrates' use of *mythos* may indicate that even before formal recantation, he thinks the account faulty.<sup>11</sup>

At *Resp.* 376d9–10 Sokrates embarks upon the description of the education of the Guardians. He sums up his resolve: 'Come then, as if we are telling a *mythos* (ὥσπερ ἐν μύθῳ μυθολογοῦντες) and have plenty of time, let's educate the men in our discourse (λόγῳ).' Sokrates draws attention to the fact that the use of *mythos* vocabulary is a figure. He will construct a system of education in discourse (*logos*), but will do so *as if* he is telling *mythoi*. The formulation underlines the fact that Sokrates' ideal city has no existence in the real world, only in the realm of words, as he acknowledges at 471–4. In fact, such a city will only come into existence when philosophers become kings. Sokrates' argument in favour of philosopher-kings is framed by mythologising vocabulary. He concludes:

Then will they [the many] still be angry at us when we say that until the race of philosophers controls the city, there will be no cessation of evils either for the city or for the citizens, nor will the city that we mythologise in word (μυθολογοῦμεν λόγῳ) find its fulfilment in deed? (501e2–5)

We note the apparently unproblematic juxtaposition of *mythos* and *logos* vocabulary, and also that the phrase 'mythologise in word' is a structural equivalent of 'create in word' at 472d–e. There is nothing 'mythological' about either the good city or the philosopher-king, except that they both exist potentially rather than actually. Here as in the *Phaedrus* therefore, *mythos* can refer to philosophical discussion. In the *Phaedrus*, the *mythos* is to be rejected,<sup>12</sup> whereas in the *Republic* it is an as-yet unrealised hope for the future. These instances share a feeling that the discourses in question are characterised by a slippage between them and the world. Yet this

<sup>11</sup> Brisson 1982: 161 is thus off the mark when he suggests that the speech is assimilated to *mythos* because it is a game.

<sup>12</sup> Contrast this with the 'mythic hymn' (265c1) of Sokrates' second speech.

slippage can be variously described: in one instance the problem is falsity, in the other ontological remoteness.

As we move from these examples of *mythos* as theory in the middle dialogues into late-period usage, we note the theories in question are more easily associated with the products of defined philosophical viewpoints. In the *Theaetetus*, *mythos* is used three times to refer to Protagoras' relativistic doctrine of man as measure. Sokrates identifies Theaitetos' hypothesis that knowledge is perception with Protagorean relativism, and contends that this doctrine entails a theory of universal flux.<sup>13</sup> After describing a world in flux, Sokrates asks Theaitetos whether he perceives the connection of this theory to what has gone before: 'What then does this *mythos* mean for us in respect to what has been said previously?' (156c3–4). The use of *mythos* implies a Socratic distancing from the subject matter (Sokrates will attempt to demolish the thesis), but also isolates the theory as a defined intellectual unit claiming cultural authority. Refutation of the theory undermines both author and authority. Thus Sokrates' (premature) claim of victory: 'And so, in fact, the *mythos* of Protagoras perished, and at the same time so did yours, namely that knowledge and perception are the same' (164d8–10).

Sokrates refers to Protagoras as the 'father of the *mythos*', and admits that if he were alive, he would have defended it (164e2–3). In fairness to Protagoras, Sokrates puts into his mouth a long defence (166a2–168c2). He chides Sokrates for arguing dishonestly, and for frightening and confusing his dialectic partner, who was only a boy (166a3). The level of argument that follows this objection is more sophisticated. Both Sokrates and Theodoros later call Protagoras' theory a *logos* (168d4; 183c7); clearly content alone does not influence the choice of vocabulary. Sokrates may call Protagorean relativity a *mythos* because he is talking to a boy, and 'myth' is thus the correct form of speech.<sup>14</sup> There is also an implication that there is something wrong with the theory; the use of *mythos* would then forecast its refutation.<sup>15</sup> Yet for all this, *mythos* does refer to philosophical argument – an argument whose status is fraught and uncertain.

We find the same treatment of *mythos*, surrounded by the same reservations and implications, in the *Sophist*. The word appears twice,

<sup>13</sup> Protagoras' 'revelation' is couched in language of mystic initiation (155e–156a). See Ford 1994 for the significance of Protagoras' talking head, and especially (207) for an appreciation of the resonance of initiatory language here (and at 152c). Compare *Resp.* 378a, where the (unsuitable) mythological deeds of Kronos, even if true, are not to be accessible to the young, but are to be told only to a select few after a pledge of secrecy. In this case, a myth is to be the secret at the heart of a mystery; in the *Theaetetus* a philosophical doctrine is ironically assimilated to the same status. Compare also another case of sophistic 'initiation', the Corybantic variety performed by Euthydemus and his brother at *Euthd.* 277d.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Resp.* 377a4–6; *Plt.* 268e4–6.

<sup>15</sup> Compare Brisson 1982: 161.

both times in connection with Eleatic monism. In order to argue that what-is-not has some being, the Stranger must dispose of Parmenides and the Eleatics, who contend that what-is-not has no being at all. He contends that Parmenides and those who have talked about the nature of being have done so carelessly. He calls their accounts *mythoi*: 'Each one of them appears to me to recount to us a myth (μῦθόν τινα) as though we were children' (242c8–9).<sup>16</sup> The Eleatics, in particular, recount in their *mythoi* that all is one (242d7). Such philosophers do not care whether their audience can follow what they are saying; they proceed without defining what they mean by locutions like 'things that are' or 'have come to be' (243a7–b10). The Stranger's complaint is that earlier philosophical accounts give a narrative rather than a dialectical account of reality. Since the audience cannot stop the narrative to ask for clarification, it is uninformative. We are reminded of the strictures against written texts in the *Phaedrus*; they are not alive, cannot respond to questioning, and are therefore not the best means to pursue philosophy (*Phdr.* 275–6). Ordinary *mythoi*, like the epideictic speeches from which Sokrates tries to wean the sophists, pursue their own course without regard for audience interaction and thus risk being antiphilosophical. The Stranger in the *Sophist* transforms the Presocratics into mythologists, assimilating them to poets because their narrative accounts personalise the world as they talk of elemental warfare and reconciliation (cf. 242d1–3).<sup>17</sup>

The *mythoi* of the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* form a matching pair. In the *Theaetetus*, the *mythos* is one of relativism, connected to a theory of universal flux. Even so, Sokrates acknowledges that there is an opposed theory of universal motionlessness (*Tht.* 180d7–e4). When Theaitetos demands an examination of the (Eleatic) monists, Sokrates demurs; a treatment of Parmenides would be a vast task, and deserves separate attention (183c8–184b1). The Stranger takes up this task in the *Sophist*, relieving Sokrates of a task which he does not seem to relish, labelling monism a *mythos*.<sup>18</sup> Both dialogues associate *mythos*/theory

<sup>16</sup> Note also the assimilation of Ionian and Sicilian philosophers to Muses at 242d7–8.

<sup>17</sup> Cornford (1957: 41–3 and *passim*) perceived a similar connection between poetic and Presocratic accounts of the world.

<sup>18</sup> Does the *Sophist* respond to Sokrates' expressed fear that such a discussion might well fail to comprehend what Parmenides has to say? Sokrates' diffidence contrasts with the Stranger's aggression. Sokrates attributes failure in understanding Parmenidean philosophy to his own insufficiency (*Tht.* 184a2–3), whereas the Stranger blames Presocratic methodological ineptitude (*Soph.* 243a7–b1). Perhaps Sokrates is absent from the *Sophist* because he does not show enough zeal in cross-examining monism. This reinforces the conclusions drawn above (n. 6) from Sokrates'/Herakles' absence from the philosophical Gigantomachy. For Sokrates' refusal to complete a project when displeased by its prospective content, compare *Phdr.* 241de.

with childhood, that of Theaitetos and of (metaphorically) the Presocratic audience. The Stranger extends this metaphor when he concludes that, like children, they must pray to have two things at once, both being and not-being (*Soph.* 249d3–4). But now the desires of childhood turn out to have a better philosophical basis than the tales of philosophical ancestors (see above, Chapter 6). It is part of the truth to say that Plato makes his speakers label these theories *mythoi* because they are false. But they are also *mythoi* because they leave their audience behind (cf. *Tht.* 179e–180c) and make dialectic impossible.

Let us close this section by looking at one final analogy between *mythos* and argument. At the beginning of the *Philebus*, Sokrates and Protarkhos have difficulty in settling questions of plurality and unity. The identity of the one and the many seems to be every debater's party trick (15d–16a). Possible objections to their discussion based on this objection threaten to shut down their exchange even before it gets under way (ὁ λόγος ἡμῖν ἐκπεσὼν οἰχίσεται, 13d6). The hard-line position that knowledge is never unlike knowledge would be disastrous: 'Then our discussion, like a *mythos*, would perish and die, but we ourselves would be saved at the price of absurdity' (κᾶπειθ' ἡμῖν οὕτως ὁ λόγος ὥσπερ μῦθος ἀπολόμενος οἴχοιτο, αὐτοὶ δὲ σωζοίμεθα ἐπὶ τινος ἀλογίας, 14a3–5). Sokrates' solution is to posit a conjunction of limit and unlimited.<sup>19</sup> Here, Sokrates' own discussion is compared to a *mythos*, but it is the sophistic quibblers, who equivocate on plurality and unity, who exhibit the childish behaviour one might associate with myth. Such equivocation would make Sokrates and Protarkhos 'more childish than they should be' (13d6). Methodological childishness becomes an explicit issue at 15d–16b. There, Sokrates talks about the young men who play with the identity of the one and the many, rolling it this way and that to the annoyance of their elders. Nevertheless, a little later Protarkhos compares the audience (positively) to a group of children who declare that you can't take back a present once it has been given (19e3–4); thus they will compel Sokrates to deal adequately with the subject at hand.<sup>20</sup> Platonic childhood, like *mythos*, is a complex phenomenon. A child need not be childish, and grown-up intellectuals can be childish themselves or treat their audience like children. Theoretical myths should not escape our scrutiny because they proceed from the mouths of renowned intellectuals.

<sup>19</sup> Just as the solution to the problematic philosophical *mythos* in the *Sophist* was to posit a conjunction of being and not-being.

<sup>20</sup> Compare the same ambivalence in the *Sophist*, above, p. 176.

Statesman: *cosmology and paradigm*

With the *Statesman*, we enter a more complicated mythological realm. Not only does the dialogue contain a lengthy cosmological myth, but the main speaker, the Eleatic Stranger, elaborates a theory of myth as paradigm. The successes and failures of the attempt to use a cosmological framework to define the statesman illustrate the difference in scope between the late methodological and the middle dialogues, and confirm the lessons about the perils of narrative accounts surveyed in the previous section. The myth of the *Statesman* does not stand for a philosophical theory, but is used for theoretical/methodological ends. There is, however, a misfit between those ends and its narrative form. As a narrative, it has an innate tendency to move beyond the confines of simple illustrative paradigm (the end for which it was designed). Literary and cosmic magnificence may not be the best way to come to grips with the minutiae of late-period dialectic.<sup>21</sup> It follows, then, that for my present purposes I am less interested in the specific content of the myth of the *Statesman* as an expression of a defined political programme, or as a serious attempt at scientific cosmology. Readings along these lines are valuable, but my focus is the methodological embedding of the myth in the surrounding argument.

At the beginning of the dialogue the Younger Sokrates and the Stranger try to define the statesman. The only way to do this is to isolate him from the crowd of his competitors in trying to run the state and look at him in himself. Therefore:

We will mix in a sort of game (παίδϊον), for we must make use of a large portion of a great *mythos*, and as for the rest, just as we were doing before, we must arrive at the summit of our search by continually dividing one category from another. . . . So then, pay close attention to my *mythos*, just like children do. You haven't left behind the years of childhood by much. (268d8–e6)

Familiar here is the notion of myth as a game, its association with childhood, and the contention that it is required by the argument. The myth is seen explicitly as a necessary digression in the middle of a longer sequence of collection and division. The Stranger thinks an earlier definition of the statesman (as shepherd of the human flock) flawed; the myth is designed to reveal the nature of the flaw. It is not, therefore, a conclusion to an argument (as in *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*), nor is it an inspired insight that may later serve as a basis for analysis (as in the

<sup>21</sup> Lane 1998: 120–2 comes to similar conclusions.

*Phaedrus*), but is marked as a heuristic device. Plato underlines this difference by the way that he makes the Stranger proceed with his cosmology.

The Stranger's procedure is to construct rationalising explanations of the myths of Atreus and Thyestes, the time the sun reversed its course, and autochthony. All these ancient stories, we learn, have their source in the same event, which he will tell to make clear the nature of the king (269b8–c2). He then narrates a complex cosmological myth in which the world periodically changes the direction of its rotation according to whether god is 'at the helm'. In the previous age to this one, men were born from the ground and nature brought forth food spontaneously.<sup>22</sup> Kronos was the shepherd of the human flock. These events worked their way into the mythological tradition, but without the explanation connecting them. It may seem strange that Plato makes one of his characters engage in what is essentially 'rationalising' analysis, a practice which Sokrates deprecates in the *Phaedrus*. The Stranger's version of rationalisation is, however, different from the norm. The purpose of rationalisation was to reduce fabulous events into comprehensible history, but the Stranger does the opposite. He explains *mythoi* through something *more* fabulous: the tale of cosmic revolutions.<sup>23</sup> The myths are not argued away but are fitted into a larger and more complex context. In fact, the problem with the Stranger's myth may be that it carries complexity too far.

As the myth proceeds, we are made aware that the narrative is taking on a life of its own. Like the *Theaetetus*, the myth contains its own internal digression on the opportunities and obligations of the philosophical life. In 271c, the Younger Sokrates asks the Stranger about the nature of life in the reign of Kronos. The Stranger describes a system of divine tendance by various *daimones* during which mankind lived at ease, and then asks which life is the happier, that in the reign of Kronos or that in the current reign of Zeus? (272b8–d1). The decision turns on the kind of *mythoi* men told in the reign of Kronos. If they used their leisure to engage in philosophical conversation, they were blessed. If, instead, they told the kinds of *mythoi* (272c7) tradition says they did, they were certainly no happier than contemporary man. Since the truth of the matter is

<sup>22</sup> This traditional view of the age of Kronos has recently been challenged by Brisson (1995) and Rowe (1995b: 11–13), but see Lane 1998: 103–5.

<sup>23</sup> With the Stranger's rationalisations, compare the Egyptian priests' rationalising explanation of the myth of Phaithon at *Ti.* 22b ff. This small increase in the frequency of rationalising explanation in Plato may reflect a growing interest in historical accounts (Gill 1993: 66).

irretrievable, the Stranger redirects their attention to the *mythos* at hand (272d4–6). It is noteworthy, however, that mythical cosmology calls forth ethical reflection, even in the midst of an attempt to arrive at dialectical definition.<sup>24</sup>

The myth begins to draw to its close at 273e4–5, as the divine creator once more takes control of the revolution of the world. In order to reveal the nature of a king, however, the Stranger focuses briefly on the development of civilisation in the period subsequent to god's withdrawal from the revolution of the world; only then can the *mythos* come to an end (274e1). This double movement towards closure emphasises the formal dependence of the myth on the dialectical purpose for which it was created. The Stranger can now specify the flaw in the definition of the statesman as shepherd of the human flock: such tendance belongs to the divine shepherd in the reign of Kronos, not to the ruler in the current age.<sup>25</sup> The myth has revealed that the earlier divisions were idealistic. The Stranger discerned a similarity between the first definition and mythological accounts of the Golden Age of Kronos. By elaborating a cosmological framework that would take into account both a pastoral political fantasy (required by the first definition), and the state of the world as we know it, he can clarify issues of statesmanship by extrapolation. Thus the dialogue circles out through dialectical method to a description of the (mythological) world that a definition requires, contrasts, still mythically, the world in which we actually live, and elaborates a definition of the statesman appropriate to it. The cosmic scale of the myth illustrates the implications of the early definition.<sup>26</sup> Myth thus works as an opposite to the method of paradigms adduced later, since paradigm illustrates the large and complex by moving towards it through the small and simple (as the example of the letters of the alphabet shows: 277d–278e).

The Younger Sokrates thinks that the flaw in the first definition can be corrected and a true definition achieved fairly quickly (277a). The Stranger, however, does not agree: their definition of the statesman is still too 'sketchy'. He illustrates his worry by analogy with sculpture and painting in a passage that we must consider at length:

<sup>24</sup> The ethical aspect of the myth becomes even more pronounced if we accept Nightingale's (1996) suggestion that one aim of the myth is to juxtapose two hypothetical but unreal states of the universe in order to explore the nature of human free will.

<sup>25</sup> Nancy 1995: 231–2 reads in the criticism of the first definition a comment on Sokrates' vision of the ruler as a herdsman (*Tht.* 174d).

<sup>26</sup> Compare the city-soul analogy of the *Republic*.



Just as statue-makers sometimes hurry when they should not and delay themselves because they have made the individual details of their work greater and more numerous than they had to, so we just now, so that we might reveal the mistake in our previous exposition not only quickly but also with magnificence, and thinking too that it was fitting to create grand examples for the king, raised up a marvellous mass of *mythos* and were forced to use a greater portion of it than we had to. And so we have made our demonstration rather long and we totally failed to perfect the *mythos*. Instead, our argument simply seems, like a picture, to have a satisfactory outline, but has not yet achieved vividness through, so to speak, the application of paint and the blending of colours. For those who can follow, it is more fitting to reveal each living thing through word and diction than through painting and all the arts. For those who cannot follow it is fitting to use the arts. (*Plt.* 277a6–c6)

The interpretation of this passage is problematic, and the precise nature of the mistake made by the sculptors is unclear. We can, however, extract the following concerns. The analogy with the statue-makers implies that the myth was, in some sections, too elaborate. The analogy with the painters suggests that their discussion has been too sketchy. The desires for speed and for ‘magnificence’ exist in some, possibly transgressive, relationship with a canon of appropriateness. The Stranger mentions this fear again at 286b6–c4. There, he compares the length of the myth to the elaboration of the analogy between statesman and weaver. The danger is that these accounts may be both long and superfluous (286c1). Nevertheless, the standard that must be applied is one of appropriateness (286d2). One may only censure a long discourse if a shorter one would have reached a philosophical goal just as effectively (286e–287a). The implication here is that their earlier worries were misplaced.

Precision, we conclude, must not be sacrificed to speed. But how are we to apply this conclusion to the analogy of the sculptors and painters? Does the Stranger mean to say that they were not making the same mistakes, or that what appeared to be mistakes were, in fact, not? The painter section of the analogy does not refer to a mistake, but to incompleteness. As for the sculptors, they merely slow themselves down by over-elaboration. Taken together, the two halves of the analogy imply that concentration on one part of the myth has entailed that not all its sections achieved an equal finish. Proportionate attention is crucial.<sup>27</sup> This brings us to the question of what is appropriate, or ‘proportional’ in a mythological representation. The Stranger admits that his account

<sup>27</sup> For other examples of uneven narrative treatment connected with the topos of ‘more haste, less speed’, see *Resp.* 528d7–8; *Plt.* 264b2–5.

will be selective. Like the poet who has a choice of numberless paths of song, the Stranger must focus his theme: 'the other consequences of such an arrangement would be too numerous to tell, but concerning the self-generating livelihood of men, this is the way the tale has been told . . .' (271e2–5). Again, at 274b1–5, as the Stranger begins his description of civilisation in the Age of Zeus, he first points out that this is the point of the whole story, and then dismisses a consideration of animals in order to concentrate on man. Not all aspects of the mythological cosmology are equally elaborated, then; the focus is on human concerns. But has the Stranger not made on the level of mythology the same mistake that the younger Sokrates made in the preliminary divisions? In 262a he was censured for dividing the rearing of humans from the rearing of animals, since such a cut was not made in the middle of the class of living things, but was too small and disproportionate. What makes for a good narrative is not what makes for a good division; we begin to see a misfit between method and narrative form.

If elaborated with equal attention to each detail, the complete myth would have been immense (think of the *Timaieus*). No wonder it is incomplete. As it is, the Stranger has been forced to use a larger portion of it than he would have liked. According to him, its only really necessary part is the portrait of the divine herdsman. Yet it is still unclear whether the Stranger's 'cut' in the myth was appropriate. The myth has received an uneven treatment, yet doing justice to the mythological narrative would result – and perhaps has resulted – in a disproportionate discussion. In this case, one must judge what is appropriate from the purpose at hand, and in the *Statesman*, that purpose is methodological. A long treatment is appropriate when it improves the ability of the interlocutors to divide according to forms (286d), but this ability may not be encouraged by mythological narrative. This is not to say that philosophical myth is generally inappropriate. Rather, it is the wrong tool for the development of a specialisation in the technical methodology of collection and division.

The question of the appropriate paradigm for the discussion becomes central in the aftermath of the myth. At the end of the long passage quoted above, the Stranger deprecates the use of analogies from painting and the manual crafts. The philosophically sophisticated should be able to understand a description couched in words rather than in pictures. He reinforces this point at 285d9–286b1.<sup>28</sup> Some things

<sup>28</sup> The interpretation of this passage is problematic, but I accept the interpretation of Rowe 1995b: 210–12 (with bibliography).

can be easily understood by references to perceptible likenesses without the use of words. The most important things, however, are not susceptible to easy analogies. Both the sculpture/painting analogy and the weaving analogy are perceptible likenesses, but the former is a second-order analogy, whereas the latter is first order.<sup>29</sup> The comparison of statesmanship to weaving is direct, but the sculpture analogy comments on the means by which the statesman was to be portrayed. But using mythological material as a way of illustrating philosophical procedure is problematic because a myth has a narrative integrity all its own. As a narrative it demands an introduction, a conclusion, all those elements that Sokrates lists at *Phaedrus* 264c2–5 and that make a discourse analogous to an animal. Myth, then, has an innate tendency to expand beyond the confines of a simple paradigm such as weaving. It is a creative and imitative work, and as such, is like a sculpture or a painting. Any reader of the *Republic*, however, knows that these forms of imitation are problematic. While the picture may be useful for drawing broad conclusions, it fails to get to the heart of the matter. To the extent that the myth is analogous to a sculpture, it must be unsuccessful.

Methodological discussion should be uninterested either in broad strokes or in narrative elaboration. Only dialectical elaboration is acceptable. The sensible (that is, pictorial) aspect of likenesses renders them dangerous; this is why verbal, non-pictorial description is to be preferred. Likewise, any method for generating description that can be compared to the production of an imitative picture is flawed. In retrospect, the assertion that clarity or vividness (ἐνάργεια) in their account could be achieved by means of the narrative mixing of colours and by paints (φαρμάκοις, a word that should give us pause) seems misconceived. The finest things are described by word alone and have no image that is vividly or plainly worked (ἐναργῶς, 286a2). When the Stranger discusses the proper use of paradigms, he uses the analogy of letters, syllables, and learning to read. One compares similar syllables in words of lesser and greater complexity; similarly, one comes to understand a lesser-known object by comparing it with a better-known one (277d9–278d6). It is no accident that this example of the use of paradigm is determinedly non-pictorial and centred on *logos*. Letters themselves are signs representing sounds, and to this extent their exemplary capa-

<sup>29</sup> Weaving's careful juxtaposition of separate threads to create a whole does, in fact, have second-order implications (cf. Lane 1998: 46–61). It is, therefore, related to the process of collection and division and is a useful model of philosophical discussion. A similar metaphor of stitching-together serves as a paradigm for the production of epic.

bilities are second-order, but they are also more abstract than the image of a statue and are thus more prone to concentrate the mind on questions of abstract description.

Each of us runs the risk of knowing what we know as if it were dream knowledge which we do not recognise when awake (277d1–4). To retrieve this knowledge we must move from small examples to great. The drawback of a mythological paradigm is that it must move from great examples to great and will thus be less philosophically precise. The reference to ‘dream-knowledge’ is suggestive. The scientific application of paradigm transforms dream-knowledge to waking knowledge. Yet the use of myth in the middle dialogues might aptly be termed the expression of dream-knowledge associated with intuitive knowledge.<sup>30</sup> In these cases, mythical paradigms reflected a state of knowledge which either culminated or prepared for more methodical analysis. These are now dismissed in favour of a use of paradigm which does not portray a state but constitutes a method.<sup>31</sup> The myth of the *Statesman* allows the Stranger to feel his way towards a definitional mistake, but this is not a systematic process. In spite of its ethical and protreptic advantages, myth proves too imprecise.

The cosmological myth of the *Statesman* is ‘a marvellous mass’ which exerts narrative compulsion on the Stranger. The desire for narrative magnificence that would match the exalted status of the king (μεγαλοπρεπῶς) has resulted in a narrative colossus of uneven polish. But literary magnificence may not be the appropriate means to gain a philosophical end. This is the point of Plato’s wordplay around *megaloprepeia* at 277a. Grand models (μεγάλα παραδείγματα) are *not* fitting (πρέπειν). He breaks down the word into its constituent parts and implies that the two elements do not fit together when it comes to philosophical paradigms. For the purposes of the methodological dialogues, myth must be ‘larger than is necessary’. The literary richness it brings threatens to distract when fine distinctions are at issue. When the Stranger returns to the vocabulary of *megaloprepeia*, it is, predictably enough, in the discussion of due measure (284de). The statement that excess and deficiency can be measured in relation to a norm is said to come to the aid of the Stranger and Young Sokrates ‘magnificently’ (μεγαλοπρεπῶς). A little further on, the Stranger divides the art of measurement into relative measure

<sup>30</sup> At *Meno* 85c, the newly aroused opinions of the slave, elicited through recollection, are compared to a dream. They will be transformed into knowledge by future testing. Compare the movement from unconscious to conscious recollection in the *Phaedrus*.

<sup>31</sup> Goldschmidt 1947: 56, 98.

and due measure (τό μέτριον καὶ τὸ πρέπον καὶ τὸν καιρὸν καὶ τὸ δέον, 284e6–7; note how the last three abstractions correspond to the sculpture/painting analogy of 277a). This dialectic cut is a large one (μέγα, 284e9). Normative discourse is characterised by *megaloprepeia*, and these norms are part of a large methodological division. Thus a term that was originally evaluative of artistic grandeur has been transformed into one of approval of technical philosophical procedure. In one of the last sentences of the dialogue, the Stranger pointedly describes the fabric of state woven by the Statesman as ‘most magnificent’ (μεγαλοπρεπέστατον, 311c2). Excellence in statesmanship, as in philosophy, arises from fine and exact work. The close-woven texture of the state or of an argument, abstract though it be, is the deserving recipient of any judgement of magnificence.

The *Statesman*, then, resumes and dismisses the mythological practice of the middle period. There, the teleological myths present a synoptic view of areas of ethical concern, a broader perspective on the nurture of the soul. They focus on the difficulties and limits of human knowledge and understanding. When we move to the later dialogues, the focus changes. Plato’s concern is now the conditions for truth in language, for scientific method. Once we have absorbed the uncertainties inherent in the use of language and in the consideration of the soul, we may, with caution, proceed to a rigorous examination of what philosophical language *can* do. Such an examination, however, does not lend itself to a specifically narrative illumination. The *mythoi* of Parmenides and the other Presocratics in the *Sophist*, and Protagoras’ relativistic *mythos* in the *Theaetetus*, fail because they inappropriately present a view of the world that is a narrative rather than a detailed examination that all can follow. A true account of the world must resist being swept along by a narrative flow. All these late *mythoi*, directly or indirectly, bespeak the need to concentrate on philosophical fundamentals.

The late dialogues give the impression they are part of a larger project. This is why certain of them are associated in a trilogic structure: *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philosopher* (this last never written); *Timaeus*, *Critias* (incomplete), *Hermocrates* (never written). Moreover, they can be characterised by narrative deferrals: the *Theaetetus* postpones consideration of Eleatic monism until the *Sophist*. The *Statesman* evinces an awareness that there are topics that must be deferred until another occasion (284d1–2). We shall see similar deferrals in the *Timaeus*. Giving a systematic account of the most important matters by using collection and division is a mighty task. Myth can lend a certain clarity to the process of division

because it plays out the implications of the division, but it is too broad to be helpful in achieving a definition. Methodological concerns demand a tighter beam. In the case of the afterlife of the soul and the implications of its immortality, myth was acceptable and necessary because precise formulation was either impossible or too lengthy or both. The *Statesman*, however, has as its mission exact definition. The interlocutors were misled by their belief that grand subjects require grand myths. This may be true for the presentation of the soul, which requires a grand, complex, majestic, self-qualifying myth because we cannot grasp exactly what it is. In the case of a definition which hopes to eschew the intuitive, mythological grandeur is inappropriate.

#### CONSTRUCTION AND RECEPTION IN THE *TIMAEUS* AND *CRITIAS*

The discussion so far has not taken into account two of the largest and most significant *mythoi* of the late period, those of the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*. Whereas the *mythoi* of the previous section were directed mostly at philosophical neophytes, the interlocutors here are philosophically and politically expert. Moreover, as we shall see, the *mythoi* they construct are the philosophical equivalent of epideictic festival orations – the narrative accounts we are supposed to mistrust. Are these accounts, then, dangerous? No, because they are presented in a self-qualifying way, to an audience of mature intellectuals who are aware of the pitfalls of narrative presentation. They are examples of the possibility of a global theorising of the past, both history and cosmology, by masters of method. They use myth to construct an ideal past along the lines of the Noble Lie of the *Republic*, and to construct a philosophical cosmology that is a telling combination of myth and argument. The interaction of the speakers presents a metanarrative about the construction and reception of the mythico-historical past (the Atlantis myth), and about the provisionality of language (the cosmology of the *Timaeus*).

#### *Atlantis: redesigning a philosophical past*<sup>32</sup>

The beginning of the *Timaeus* serves as an introduction to both dialogues, although only the *Timaeus* was completed. Sokrates is in conversation with Timaios of Lokroi (a politically influential astronomer), Hermokrates (chief Syracusan opponent of Athens during the late

<sup>32</sup> For a fuller version of my argument here, and an attempt to set the myth in the context of fourth-century foreign policy, see Morgan 1998.

Peloponnesian War), and Kritias (who may or may not be the notorious member of the Thirty Tyrants).<sup>33</sup> He refers to a *Republic*-like discussion on the previous day and declares his dissatisfaction with it (19bc). He compares himself to a person who, when he beholds a picture of beautiful animals or sees them at rest, is seized by the desire to see them in motion. So too, he wants to see the just city in action. The philosophical entertainment envisaged by the interlocutors is that Timaios will first give an account of the creation of the universe, and Kritias will tell a story of the virtuous ancient Athenians and their struggle with the people of Atlantis. By ‘coincidence’, the excellence of ancient Athens is well suited to set the picture of the ideal state into narrative motion.

Like the *Gorgias*, but implicitly, the introduction to the Atlantis myth problematises the truth status of the account, juxtaposing *mythos* and *logos*. Kritias begins: ‘Listen then, Sokrates, to a very strange but absolutely true *logos*, as Solon, the wisest of the Seven Wise Men, once told it’ (*Ti.* 20d7–e1). Kritias and Sokrates stress that the tale is true from any point of view. The deed of the ancient Athenians is not merely spoken of, but actually performed (οὐ λεγόμενον μὲν, ὡς δὲ πραχθὲν ὄντως, 21a4–5). The ideal state that was described ‘as if in myth’ (ὡς ἐν μύθῳ) will now be transferred to the realm of truth (ἐπὶ τᾷληθείᾳ) (26c8–d1). The tale has the great advantage of not being an invented *mythos* but a true *logos* (μὴ πλασθέντα μῦθον ἀλλ’ ἀληθινὸν λόγον, 26e4–5). Now contrast Sokrates’ introduction of his myth at *Gorgias* 523a: “‘Listen, then,” as they say “to a very fine *logos*,” which I think you will consider a *mythos*, but I consider it a *logos*, in the belief that the things I am about to tell you are true.’ The *Timaeus*, like the *Gorgias*, brings issues of truth and falsity to the fore, but, whereas in the *Gorgias*, truth and falsity depend on ethical presuppositions, this is not so in the *Timaeus*. Why should levels of truth be acknowledged in the former, but not in the latter, especially when the interlocutors are so sophisticated? Part of the answer is to read Kritias’ exclamation over the marvellous coincidence of Solon’s ancient Athens and Sokrates’ ideal city as an example of ‘Platonic irony’, which Rowe has described as ‘a form of expression which, when taken with its context, tends to undermine itself . . . We are taken momentarily backstage, as it were, and shown the puppet-master at work’.<sup>34</sup> When Kritias says ‘I was amazed . . . when I realised how, marvellously, by some chance and not on purpose, you agreed in most respects with what

<sup>33</sup> Gill 1977: 294, n. 33. This interpretation is accepted also by J. K. Davies 1971: 325, but see, *contra*, Luce 1978: 76–8, with discussion of previous scholarship.

<sup>34</sup> Rowe 1987: 95.

Solon said' (25e4–5), the emphasis of the formulation invites the reader to distance herself from the narrative performance. Yet we shall discover even better grounds to believe that Plato needs Sokrates to accept the narrative framework. In what follows, I shall suggest, first, that the reception of the Atlantis myth by the dialogue's interlocutors is an invitation by Plato to the reader to observe a 'Noble Lie' in action and speculate upon the possibilities of didactic mythologising. Second, that the myth is a Platonic rewriting of civic encomiastic discourse, and a comment on Greek notions about the paradigmatic role of the past. Third, that it plays with fourth-century ideas about how one validates the present through the past by making Solon the protagonist in its fantasising political history.

The story of Atlantis has been passed down in Kritias' family, and originated with Solon, who learned it from Egyptian priests. Solon's attempt to tell these priests the stories (μυθολογείν, 22b1) of Deukalion and the Flood, in order to count generations since and date the event, is greeted with amusement. The universe of the Egyptian priests is designed to depict the Greeks as historiographic children and to cut them off from their cultural past, and thus create a blank state on which more philosophical history may be written (cf. *Republic* 382d1–3: 'In the mythological narratives we've just been talking about, because we don't know the truth about the past, we liken the false to the true as much as possible and so make it useful'). Solon's mythological generations, and thus the genealogical complexities of the Greek aristocracy, are called childish stories (τὰ γοῦν νυνδὴ γενεαλογηθέντα . . . παίδων βραχὺ τι διαφέρει μύθων, 23b3–5). The members of an entire civilisation are called spiritual children; no Greek has the historical sophistication that would allow him to be called an old man (22b5–7). The mechanism that produces Greek ignorance is cosmological. Periodic destructions of mankind destroy civilisation and any accurate memory of the past except in Egypt, which is saved by the river Nile (22c–e). Each civilisation, then, must reconstruct its past after each destruction. Clearly, the success of such a project will depend on one's prior knowledge of the truth, and since this truth is not a matter of record, the success will vary greatly. In the case of the current Greeks, these reconstructed 'charter myths' are childish and, for Plato, harmful. Once they are dismissed by an authoritative source, the process of philosophical reconstruction can begin.

The myth itself, as summarised in the *Timaeus*, tells how Athens used to excel in war and in the excellence of its laws; it had the finest system of



government and performed the fairest deeds. Among these deeds, the greatest was the defence of Europe and Asia against an unprovoked attack by the hybriatic island empire of Atlantis. When Atlantis attacked, Athens showed its excellence. She was the leader of the Greeks, but when they all deserted her she stood alone, defeated the enemy, prevented the free from being enslaved, and freed those who had been. This victory was, however, followed by earthquakes in which Atlantis sank in to the sea and the Athenian army was swallowed up by the earth (23d–25d). The narrative of the *Critias* recounts in greater detail the disposition of ancient Athens and Atlantis, and begins to tell how Atlantis declined from virtue to tyranny. Here then indeed is a charter myth for modern Athens,<sup>35</sup> one which identifies it with the ideal state of the *Republic* and in whose truth every character in the dialogue, including Sokrates, claims to believe. This is the more impressive because, as Sokrates tells us, Timaios, Kritias, and Hermokrates are members of the only class of people fitted both by nature and by nurture to have a share both of politics and philosophy, and to carry the discussion of the ideal city further than he can (19e–20c).

The situation is almost impossibly ideal, and is best understood with reference to the Noble Lie of the *Republic*, with which, as a charter myth for modern Athens, the tale of Atlantis has close connections.<sup>36</sup> The object of the Noble Lie is to persuade the rulers of the city especially, but failing that, the rest of the city (414c1–2), that they should care for the city and each other. It seems unlikely that they could induce the first generation to believe the myth of the metals, but it is possible that subsequent generations (415d2) could be persuaded. Is this not the situation at the beginning of the *Timaeus*? Solon has been given a charter myth for Athens from the Egyptians, conveniently fetishised as preservers of accuracy about the past.<sup>37</sup> The tale is passed down through the generations with the stamp of Solon's authoritative truth on it. It has not yet been made available to the citizens of Athens at the dramatic date of the dialogue (421 perhaps?), but it has already persuaded Kritias, and it shows every sign of having persuaded Sokrates, Timaios, and Hermokrates in advance. Of these four, remember, three have been described as being suited to share in politics and philosophy and are in fact of some political importance in their respective cities. If the aim of a charter myth is particularly to persuade the rulers, the myth of Atlantis has made an excellent start. The truth of the tale must be acknowledged by

<sup>35</sup> Gill 1993: 65.      <sup>36</sup> Gill 1993: 64–5.

<sup>37</sup> Egyptian authority in this sphere is itself a literary device (Gill 1979: 75).

the interlocutors, since a successful Noble Lie does not make its fictional status transparent. This does not mean that its status cannot be transparent to the reader.

Does this mean that Plato is inviting his readers to play the 'game of fiction'? Probably not.<sup>38</sup> Rather, he invites us to speculate what might happen if the tale of Athens and Atlantis were accepted as a charter myth not only by the political elite, but by all citizens. Acting as a fourth-century Noble Lie, it would be a powerful paradigm for reform, especially given the Athenian predilection for elaborating the paradigmatic splendours of their past, mythological and otherwise. Kritias' tale is a *festival* speech, told on the day of the Panathenaia (21a2–3), and thus must be associated with the epideictic rhetoric that characterised most Athenian festival occasions.<sup>39</sup> The most famous genre of speech glorifying the Athenian past and setting it up as a model for the present is, of course, the funeral oration, but throughout the fourth century Isokrates and others like him had been making epideictic hay with similar material.<sup>40</sup> Isokratean orations such as the *Panegyricus* and *Panathenaicus* stress the glorious past of Athens and plead for the Greeks to band together against their common enemy, the Persians.<sup>41</sup> The charter myth one chooses has implications for the political programme one desires the city to follow.

Let us examine some elements of Isokrates' charter myths.<sup>42</sup> The *Panegyricus* eulogises Athens for, among other things, making herself a model (παράδειγμα) for the rest of Greece and for being the first to lay down laws and establish a constitution (39–40). Athens has endured many great struggles, both on her own behalf and on behalf of the freedom of others (52). To enumerate all the dangers Athens faced when fighting the barbarians would be to speak at undue length; he will therefore narrate only the greatest (66), of which the most renowned is the Persian War (68). The Thracians and the Amazons tried to extend their power over Europe, but were utterly destroyed by the Athenians (68–70). The citizens of Athens at the time of the Persian Wars had good laws and strove to emulate each other in achieving the common good

<sup>38</sup> Gill 1993: 62–5.

<sup>39</sup> For the Atlantis myth as a panathenaic oration, see Cornford 1937: 4–5; Luce 1978: 59 with n. 28. On the funeral oration see Loraux [1981]/1986. As Loraux points out (302–3), Plato borrows most of the Atlantis myth from Athenian tradition.

<sup>40</sup> On festival orations, see Kennedy 1963: 166–7. <sup>41</sup> Kennedy 1963: 188–90.

<sup>42</sup> The *Panegyricus* is to be dated to 380 BC, and thus would have been available to Plato. The *Panathenaicus* dates to 342–339 BC, and thus postdates him. I do not argue here for any specific influence of Isokrates on Plato or the reverse; it is more important that Isokrates be seen as representative of epideictic trends.

(78–9). The eulogy in the *Panathenaicus* is similar: expulsion of barbarians (42–3), instruction of the other Greek cities in how to make Greece great (44). He then passes on to the excellence of her constitution – not the present one, but the constitution of the ancestors, who managed the city most nobly (120): a democracy mixed with aristocracy. Both speeches construct a eulogistic model of Athenian history for contemporary emulation. This historical encomium encompasses an Athenian constitution that surpasses all others, and deeds of valour that make Athens pre-eminent in war. Constitutional excellence is nostalgically retrojected into a mythological past.

Kritias' ancient Athens displays many of these same commonplaces of contemporary laudatory epideictic speeches. His Athens, like Isokrates', was by far the best in war and the best governed (23c5–6). Both Plato and Isokrates employ the topos of singling out one deed or group of deeds among many (*Ti.* 24d; *Panegy.* 66). Both record that Athens defended the Greeks and Europe against the incursions of hybriistic barbarians. In the *Timaeus*, Athens is the leader of Greece, undergoes extremes of danger, preserves some cities from slavery and liberates others (25c). When Kritias expands on the tale, we learn that Athenians administered justly both themselves and the rest of Greece, and were the most renowned people of that time (*Criti.* 112e). In the *Panegyricus*, Athens similarly undergoes danger and preserves the freedom of all. The city was the leader of Greece (57), and in the aftermath of the Persian Wars, because it had excelled in every danger, it was given the prize of valour and rule over the sea (72). The description of Athenian governmental practice and class structure (which refers us back to the discussion of the *Republic*) at *Critias* 110cd finds its counterparts in the Isokratean comments on the Athenian constitution cited above.

Kritias' account thus stands recognisably in the tradition of eulogistic Athenian festival speeches.<sup>43</sup> Just as these speeches treat the mythologi-

<sup>43</sup> Loraux [1981]/1986 attributes the extensive thematic parallels between Isokrates and Plato to a common reliance on the funeral oration. This model stresses how Isokrates takes both themes and modes of exposition from the oration, in what amounts to a form of plagiarism (91–7, 142). Similarly, Plato would have constructed his Atlantis myth as a 'counter-eulogy' which brings the funeral oration into question from the polemical standpoint of Platonic philosophy (298). Loraux dismisses the connection of the Atlantis myth with panathenaic orations because such orations had no institutional status in the fourth century (455 n.168). Yet the occasion for the *Timaeus*/*Critias* is not institutional and this should imply that Plato is not thinking only of the official funeral oration. I suggest that the links with Isokratean panegyric history are better read as a reflection of common concerns with the role of history in the first half of the fourth century. Panegyric narratives do find their literary ancestry in the funeral oration, but take on added resonance in contemporary debates over politics and policy.

cal past as part of an historical continuum, so Kritias assimilates myth to historical tradition. Yet Plato must make him do this in such a way that the tale is a philosophical advance over its crudely patriotic counterparts. If it is to be a 'lie', it must at least be a noble one. We have already seen that the willingness of the expert interlocutors to take the tale at face value is an indication of its philosophical nobility from the perspective of the *Republic*. His report is represented as a sincere attempt at reproduction of an authoritative source, and the content of the myth is an expression of the philosophical and didactic programme of the *Republic*. Plato has concluded that Athens' imperial and mythological pasts are equally flawed and he makes, therefore, a fresh mythological start. His construction of a philosophically-based charter myth confirms the necessity for a city to construct its own 'Noble Lie', a version of the past that will encourage the citizens to care for the land and for each other and to seek excellence in the present. Since the topoi of Athenian eulogistic rhetoric are hackneyed and unsuitable, he will transform them.

It is not enough, however, merely to construct a past. In order to be authoritative, the construction must be validated. On one level, of course, its philosophical validation should be sufficient, in that it claims to reify the theorising of the *Republic*. But how might it be validated for a non-philosophical audience? Plato's solution to this dilemma is Solon, the fourth century's most famous and authoritative framer of constitutions. Plato's deployment of this 'wisest of the Seven Sages' (*Ti.* 20d8–e1) is an exercise in how to render a history believable to a fourth-century audience. As poet and politician, Solon is ideally suited to be the purveyor of an encomiastic history of Athens with political implications. Indeed, we learn that had Solon not found the city of Athens in a state of faction when he returned from Egypt, he might have successfully put into poetry the tale he brought back with him, that is, the tale of Atlantis (*Ti.* 21c; *Criti.* 113a). Solon's manuscript notes, once owned by Kritias' grandfather, are in Kritias' possession even now. Had Solon completed his work, he would, in the opinion of the grandfather, have outstripped Homer and Hesiod (*Ti.* 21d1–3).

There is much to digest here. Solon is prevented from fulfilling his poetic potential by political pressures. As a result, poetry is only a sideline (21c4). As might be expected, the construction of poetic tales, however useful, must take second place to the running of the city. In the *Republic*, the founders of the city do not compose *mythoi* themselves, but give the poets the models according to which they should construct their

tales (379a). The only situation where this will not be the case is the Noble Lie, which must be composed by Sokrates as founder. As politician/founder, then, Solon abandons his poetic project in order to take up the more important task of being a law-giver, but he blocks out a narrative as a model for subsequent generations of Kritias' family. His poem would have rivalled the heroic and didactic epic of Homer and Hesiod, and combined both elements: the myth tells its audience how they should live their lives (on the model of the *Republic*), and celebrates the paradigmatic achievements of the Athenian past. The epic would thus have replaced Homer and Hesiod as the society's foundational text, and Solon himself would have become, not only the pre-eminent law-giver, but the pre-eminent poet. We should note in this context that Plato presents Solon's travels in a peculiar order. Both Herodotos (1.29–30) and Aristotle (*Ath. Pol.* 11.1) place Solon's visit to Egypt after his legislation. In the *Timaeus*, he is compelled to neglect poetry by the troubles he finds in the city after returning from his travels. While this formulation does not rule out the possibility that the faction (στράσεις, 21c7) in question is different from the one that led to Solon's legislation, the most natural reading is that Solon's legislation followed the trip to Egypt.<sup>44</sup> Why has Plato constructed events in this way? In order to reinforce the relative importance of poetry and statesmanship, but also so that Solon's legislation may be tinged with Egyptian authority. Let us not forget that part of what the Egyptians tell Solon is the constitution of ancient Athens that reifies the theorising of Plato's own *Republic*.<sup>45</sup>

The question of the authority for a given law or constitution was very much a live one at the time Plato was writing. Following the restoration of the democracy in 403 BC, the Athenians decided to complete the codification of their laws, and decreed that they should be governed in the ancestral way, using (among other things) the laws of Solon (Andokides 1.83). M. I. Finley has pointed out that by the 'laws of Solon' the Athenians meant 'the law of Athens as it stood in 403, some of it indeed going back to the ancient lawgivers but much of it . . . promulgated in the two centuries since Solon . . . [A]dvocates went on cheerfully citing in the courts what they called "a law of Solon," even when it was

<sup>44</sup> Plut. *Vit. Sol.* 31.3, has perceived the difficulty. Since he accepts the tradition that the travels follow the legislation, he must put Solon's abandonment of the Atlantis narrative after the rise of Peisistratos, in Solon's old age. But he must then disagree with Plato that Solon abandoned it because of lack of leisure, since he had indeed much leisure in his old age.

<sup>45</sup> This is not, however, to suggest that Solon's legislation either does, or is supposed to, reflect the constitution of the *Republic*. On the (spurious) tradition of a tripartite division of the Athenian civic body in early times along the lines of the *Republic* and *Timaeus*, see Lambert 1993: 371–80.

blatantly impossible for the enactment to have been very ancient'. The renewed democracy appropriates Solon as its 'trump card' and principle of validation in the constitutional struggles of the time.<sup>46</sup> In the fourth century, everyone 'agreed that it was Solon who founded the modern Athenian state'.<sup>47</sup> To cite Solon as an authority is to appeal to a recognisable political commonplace in an attempt to confer authority on one's version of history.<sup>48</sup> The legends of the Greek law-givers 'deserve careful study . . . because they illustrate so clearly the transformation of history by and into myth'.<sup>49</sup> With the Atlantis myth, Plato adds a new element to this body of legend, and attempts to turn myth back into (paradigmatic) history. The appeal to the authority of Solon is a crucial part of this project. As far as principles of philosophical accuracy are concerned, the model of the ideal state is complete in the *Republic*, but because it is motionless it has no power to move anyone. In order to bring about a change in attitude in a society, its charter myth must be reworked and imposed on a people willing to accept it. By associating the myth of Athens and Atlantis with Solon, Plato has Kritias engage in a characteristically fourth-century practice of tapping into an historical source for political validation. This is how a fourth-century Noble Lie would have to be presented. Both in its content and in its presentation (the appeal to Solon), the myth of Atlantis resumes and plays upon the commonplaces of contemporary panegyric and paradigmatic history.

The myth of Atlantis is an attempt to claim that the constitution of the *Republic* is the ancestral constitution of Athens and that the report of it was brought back by the man whom fourth-century Athens regarded as its most famous law-giver. This claim is framed and narrated in terms that would have a particular fourth-century appeal. How seriously should we take this claim? As readers, we are meant to find this rhetoric fairly transparent. Whereas the interlocutors must agree to accept the account at face value (in order for it to function as a Noble Lie), we are under no obligation to do so. Indeed, if we did we would miss the point that Plato is making, that Atlantis is an exercise in speculative political rhetoric, albeit philosophically based. It might be preferable if a city could be persuaded to adopt the constitution of the *Republic* without such

<sup>46</sup> Finley 1975: 39–40.      <sup>47</sup> Finley, 1975: 50.

<sup>48</sup> Note that the terms in which Kritias refers to the similarity between the Solonian and the Socratic constitutions: 'You [Sokrates] agreed with Solon' (25e), are nicely calculated to invert the real state of affairs in which Plato has made Solon agree with Sokrates.

<sup>49</sup> Szegedy-Maszak 1978: 200.

a Noble Lie, but this is unlikely; Plato must use the materials at hand.

One concern with this reading is that it threatens to make Solon too platonising a figure. Although Solon behaves in an approved Platonic fashion when he abandons poetry for politics, and although the epic of Atlantis would have filled Plato's desire for a substitute to Homer and Hesiod, he is, after all, the founder of Athenian democracy. Yet the example of Isokrates shows that one could play fairly fast and loose with the concept of 'Solonian' democracy. He uses the constitution of Solon to stand for his own rather aristocratic version of democracy (*Panath.* 120). We should not press the gulf or any possible connection between a Solonian and a Platonic constitution too far.<sup>50</sup> What was important from the point of view of political rhetoric was Solon's aura, rather than any constitutional detail.

We have seen that the traditional Greek myths that Solon tells to the Egyptian priests are the result of physical disasters that cut us off from accurate knowledge about the past. This treatment of myth differs substantially from that of, for example, Thucydides. Thucydides treats the mythological past as a remote extension of the present that functions according to familiar rules. Helen and the Trojan War may profitably be compared to the Persian or Peloponnesian conflicts, although accuracy will be impossible because of the nature of the sources. In the *Timaeus* the mythological past as known by the Greeks is irretrievably separated from them by a gulf that only the Egyptians can cross. It can only be made history by rationalisation. If we reject these myths as sources of knowledge about the past, we reject also the traditional culture that produces them. The genealogies that Solon constructs are equally ludicrous in the eyes of the Egyptians, yet it is these genealogies that constitute the link between the present and the past, not only in an abstract sense, but in a very real political one. What happens if we sever the connection between Alkmaeon and Perikles, Ajax and Kimon?<sup>51</sup> We reject a certain way of thinking about the city's past and its political culture. The failure of these myths to tell us what we need to know marks the bankruptcy, in Plato's eyes, of tradition. Traditional myth and genealogy will then be a reminder of the inaccessibility of the past. Once they have been swept

<sup>50</sup> Plato would, however, have found congenial Solon's stress on the blessings of good government and the evils of faction and the greed for wealth (poem 4). In his refusal of tyranny (frag. 33; contrast the attitude of Polos at *Grg.* 471) and his approval of moderation (frags. 28c; 36) Solon does foreshadow the philosophical statesman. At *Laws* 698b the Athenian Stranger mentions with approval the 'Solonian' constitution of Athens at the time of the Persian Wars, evidence that Plato could at least find something to work with in Athens' 'ancient constitution' (698b4).

<sup>51</sup> Finley 1975: 48–9.

away by being tied to the sensible world with its sensible disasters, Plato is free to bring down from heaven the paradigms of the ideal city and instantiate them in earthly form. It is an intentional irony that the same disasters that render the Greek mythological version of the past obsolete also sweep virtuous Athens into oblivion. Yet the inconstancies of the sensible world make any narrative account of it a risky proposition. These inconstancies necessitate an historical account that approximates closely the ideal paradigms of the philosophical intellect. Even more than Thucydides, Plato would like his historicising narrative to be a 'possession for all time'. It will take a consideration of the *eikos mythos* of the *Timaeus* to show us why this cannot be so.

*The Timaeus: language and provisionality*

The Atlantis myth confronts *mythos* with *logos* and examines the means by which one may be transformed into the other. Nevertheless, at one level – that of the reader alive to Plato's manipulations of fourth-century topoi – *mythos* remains *mythos*. The status of the Atlantis myth, despite its repercussions for the construction and reception of history, has no direct implications for the status of philosophical theory and the language and methods by which it is expressed. The *Timaeus*, however, does contain a programmatic statement on the nature of language that encapsulates and makes explicit many of the concerns I have been examining. An analysis of *mythos* / *logos* vocabulary and related issues in the dialogue will clarify the limitations of human knowledge and of language. *Mythos* is used to describe philosophically-driven cosmological speculation, but we are forced to conclude that all philosophical accounts are in some sense *mythoi*.

The cosmology of the *Timaeus* is introduced with a prayer and a warning about the limitations of language (27c–29d). Timaios distinguishes between that which always is and does not come to be, and that which always comes to be but never is. The former is apprehended by reason, the latter by opinion without reason and with the help of sensation. The creator of the world formed it according to a paradigm of the eternal, and the world is, therefore, a copy of the eternal that can be apprehended by reason. Words are interpreters, related to what they describe. Those that relate to what is stable, secure, and intelligible will be stable and unchanging (to the extent that it is possible and fitting for words to be irrefutable and unconquerable, we must in no way fall short of this). Those that relate to the copy will be likely (εἰκότως, 29c2) and



will be analogous to the stable words. It will be no wonder, then, if a cosmological account has trouble being consistent and accurate. If the account is likely (εἰκότως, 29c8), they must be satisfied, remembering that all the interlocutors are only human. They must accept the likely *mythos* (τὸν εἰκότα μῦθον) and seek nothing further (29d2–3).

Timaioi, then, suggests two possible causes of linguistic imprecision. First, words cannot be completely irrefutable and stable, but only to the extent that it is possible and fitting. The collocation of propriety and possibility is striking; these two concepts will be linked throughout Timaioi's narrative. Only what is fitting is possible and this principle governs both the content and the range of the cosmology; when we speak of details they will follow appropriately from philosophical pre-suppositions, and this same propriety will restrict the questions we can ask. Second, the stability of a narrative will also be governed by the intelligibility or sensibility of its object. The world of becoming is only a copy of the intelligible realm and any account of it will be likely at best. Words themselves are limited, both in fact and by decree, by being interpreters of that to which they refer, but this problem is increased when the referent itself (here, the sensible world) is only a copy of the intelligible model. Any discourse about our world will be at best a likely *mythos*.

Similar statements about the probability and therefore provisionality of Timaioi's account permeate his narrative. Vocabulary items deriving from the participial form *eikos* (probable, likely, or fitting) occur twenty-nine times. Of these instances, three qualify the word *mythos* and thirteen qualify the word *logos*. The adverb (εἰκότως) is used four times, and the substantivised form, either in the singular or the plural, eight times.<sup>52</sup> The majority of usages occur where Timaioi mentions a detail of his argument and comments that it is probable or reasonable. Thus, for instance, we learn that the universe came into being through divine providence as an ensouled creature, and this thesis is described as 'in accordance with the probable account' (κατὰ λόγον τὸν εἰκότα, 30b7). Again, at 56b4 it is suggested that the pyramid is the origin of fire 'according to the correct and probable account' (κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον καὶ κατὰ τὸν εἰκότα). For Timaioi, probability has methodological

<sup>52</sup> Qualifying μῦθος: 29d2, 59c6, 68d2. Qualifying λόγος: 29c2, 29c8, 30b7, 48d2, 48d3, 53d5, 55d5, 56a1, 56b4, 57d6, 59d1, 68b7, 90e8. εἰκότως: 48c1, 49b6, 55d4, 62a4. Forms of εἰκός/εἰκότα: 44d1, 48d6, 53b3, 56d1, 59d3, 67d1, 72d7, 87c2. In the remaining occurrence the adjective qualifies ἀποδείξεων (proofs) as Timaioi comments, with heavy irony, that we must accept aristocratic genealogies although they lack likely and necessary proofs (ἄνευ τε εἰκότων καὶ ἀναγκαίων ἀποδείξεων, 40e1).

implications. If we assign the cubic form to earth, we preserve the ‘probable account’ (τὸν εἰκότα λόγον, 56a1), and as Timaios begins his description of the receptacle (a passage to which we shall return), he prays that god will bring him safely to a belief in the probable (πρὸς τὸ τῶν εἰκότων δόγμα, 48d6).

In many instances, the language of probability is coupled with that of fitness and necessity.<sup>53</sup> We are told that we must speak in accordance with the language of probability, or that it is fitting for us to do so. Two examples will suffice for many. Those who want employ a probable account about nature must keep in mind the great variety of triangles (δεῖ . . . εἰκότι λόγῳ χρῆσεσθαι, 57d5–6). When Timaios narrates a rational theory of colour he wants to do it in a way that will be both likely and fitting (μάλιστα εἰκὸς πρέποι τ’ ἂν ἐπιεικεῖ λόγῳ διεξελεῖν, 67d1–2). Probability is the mode of discourse that one must use about the sensible world, as a matter both of fact and of propriety. The stress on probability recalls earlier Platonic/Socratic reserve about discursive status. We saw in the middle dialogues that Plato hedges his accounts of the soul with reservations. Thus in the *Phaedo*, Sokrates declares that it is not fitting (πρέπει) for a sensible man to maintain strongly that the truth of the afterlife is as he has said, but it is fitting and worth the risk to believe that something like it is the case (114d1–7).<sup>54</sup> In the *Phaedrus*, Sokrates remarks that it would take a long and divine discourse to say what the soul is, but a shorter and more human one to say what it is like (ἔοικεν) (246a3–6). Like Sokrates, Timaios emphasises the limitation of human knowledge (29d1, 68d3–4); the creation of the ‘likeness’ of the soul in the *Phaedrus* is conceptually and verbally tied to the method of probability in the *Timaeus*. The application of this reserve to the objects of the sensible world rather than to the metaphysics of the soul does, however, mark a change in focus.

The cosmology is provisional not just in content but also in narrative progression. Timaios proceeds in stops and starts, with revisions and qualifications. He twice makes a fresh beginning (48d–49a, 69a), and once asks his audience to assume a discussion that has not yet taken place (61d).<sup>55</sup> The narrative can be said to share, in some sense, the disorderly motion that characterised the world before the organising

<sup>53</sup> 29c8, 29d2, 30b7, 40e3, 44d2, 48b8, 53d5, 55d3, 55e7, 57d5, 67d2, 68b7, 72d8, 87c3.

<sup>54</sup> Compare *Ti.* 72d4–8, where Timaios says that they could only maintain (δυσχυρίζοιμεθα) that they have spoken the truth about the soul if god agreed with them. Nevertheless, they must risk (δισκινδυνεύειν) saying that they have spoken what is probable (εἰκός).

<sup>55</sup> See the summary of Guthrie 1975: 319–20.

intervention of the Demiurge. Indeed, Timaios admits that human modes of speech partake of the random since humans themselves are under the dominion of chance (34c2–4). This randomness entails that the account of the creation of the soul comes after that of the creation of the body, although the soul is prior to the body. There is no sense that the narrative is an organic whole in which one part inevitably leads to another; on the contrary there is rather an awareness that the narrative progression is imperfect, even that the subject imposes this imperfection.<sup>56</sup>

Let us return for a moment to the provisional nature of the cosmology's content in order to reinforce the point that the limitations of human knowledge and the limitations of language and presentation are closely intertwined. As Timaios prepares to speak of the 'receptacle', he comments that we take earth, air, fire, and water as givens and treat them as elements, whereas any person of sense would not reasonably (εἰκότως) compare them even to syllables (48b5–c1). Yet he will not speak of the real first principles because it is difficult to do so using the current method of discussion. His audience must not think that he should do so, nor could he persuade himself that he would be correct to attempt to do so. He will instead trust in the power of probability (τὴν τῶν εἰκότων λόγων δύναμιν) and try to produce an account that is more probable than most (μηδενὸς ἥττον εἰκότα, μᾶλλον δέ) (48c6–d4). He introduces the concept of the 'receptacle' but knows that the reference is obscure: 'it seems likely that the argument compels me to make evident in words a form that is difficult and dim' (49a3–4: again the collocation of necessity and likelihood). A little later he continues with the topic of the elements: since they are continually presenting themselves in different forms, it is troubling to apply a demonstrative such as 'this' or 'that' to them. Things that change should be described as 'such' (49c–50a). Several points emerge from this passage. First, that human language takes its referents for granted and imposes a stability on them that is at odds with the instability of the temporal world. Second, that Timaios' discussion of the problem of elements and the receptacle is governed by the demands of the dialectic context (if this is indeed what is meant by the 'current method of discussion'). Third, that in any case it is more suitable to trust in the power of probability than in one's own power to expound the first principles with an accuracy belied by human nature and the con-

<sup>56</sup> Contrast *Phdr.* 264.

straints of language. Fourth, that some subjects (such as the receptacle) resist linguistic expression.<sup>57</sup>

Since Timaios' cosmological account is limited by the requirements of context, subject, and language, there is ample justification for labelling it a *mythos*. The situation is complicated, however, by the use of *logos* to describe it. In fact, the cosmology is called a *logos* more often than a *mythos*.<sup>58</sup> Is there any consistent distinction made between the two terms? Brisson has suggested that *eikos mythos* signifies a *myth* that bears upon the copies of intelligible forms (i.e. the sensibles), while *eikos logos* signifies a *discourse* bearing upon these same objects. Only the actual state of sensible objects can be perceived by the senses and described by a verifiable discourse (*eikos logos*); the state of these objects before and during their creation cannot be perceived by the senses and cannot therefore be verified. *Eikos mythos* thus signifies a non-verifiable discourse relative to sensible objects before and during their constitution.<sup>59</sup> This distinction seems over rigid, however. It is difficult to group all the instances of *eikos logos* together as referring to (even potentially) verifiable accounts of sensible objects. What are we then to make of Timaios' deduction that the world came into being as a living creature endowed with soul 'according to the likely *logos*' (30b7). This is a non-verifiable account of genesis. Or again, how is it possible to classify as verifiable the suggestion that, 'according to the likely *logos*', inferior men are reincarnated as women (90e8), no matter how self-evident this may have seemed to a fourth-century astronomer? It is difficult to see any of the occurrences of *eikos logos* as verifiable. At 53d5–6 Timaios posits triangles as the basis of fire and other bodies 'according to the likely and necessary *logos*'. He then proceeds to recognise the possibility of principles that are prior to triangles, but states that only god and the friends of god know them. These comments prove nothing about verifiability, but they do set up a hierarchy of possible degrees of knowledge. We are given no information on the method by which the friend of god might acquire his or her knowledge, but nothing licences us to assume it will be by means of sensibly verifiable experience.

<sup>57</sup> The language of the proem reappears in this passage. The difficulty of speaking of the elements using trustworthy and secure speech (πιστῶ καὶ βεβαίῳ, 49b5) recalls the restriction of language that is stable and unchangeable (as far as possible) to the intelligible realm (29b). Timaios' desire to speak about the elements in a probable manner (εἰκότως, 49b6) corresponds to the λόγους εἰκότας of 29c, which apply to the sensible realm.

<sup>58</sup> See above, note 52. <sup>59</sup> Brisson 1982: 162–3.

Timaos, in fact, displays a prejudice against sensible verification.<sup>60</sup> In a passage similar to the one just examined, he proposes to give a reasonable, or fitting (67d2) account of colours. Having sketched out his approach, he comments that one could extend it to mixtures of the colours he has already dealt with. By so doing, one would preserve the likely *mythos* (εἰκότα μῦθον, 68d2). If however, one were to attempt to prove this theory by experiment, one would show oneself ignorant of the difference between human and divine nature. Only god has the knowledge of how to combine many things into one and separate the one into many. There is no man who is capable of this, nor will there ever be (68d2–7). This argument confirms the non-verifiability of Timaeian *mythos*, and it does apply to the creation of a sensible effect (the creation of colour sensation), but there is no real contrast here with the type of object to which one would apply an *eikos logos* (as, for example, the first principle of fire). In both instances, fire and colour, god has the knowledge to isolate and perceive the primary constituent principles, and this knowledge is not inherent in human nature. Access to it is by divine rather than mortal channels.

In the discussions of fire and of colour *eikos mythos* and *eikos logos* seem interchangeable. Does this mean that no distinction can be drawn between them? We have already examined Timaios' 'proem' to his account, where he refers to entire cosmology as an *eikos mythos* since it deals with the sensible rather than the intelligible and eternal world, and associates it closely with 'likely accounts' (λόγους . . . εἰκότας) (29c7–d3). The other occurrence of *eikos mythos* in the cosmology comes at 59c6 as Timaios discusses mixtures of the four elements which one may reason out 'pursuing the form of likely *mythoi*' (τὴν τῶν εἰκότων μύθων μεταδιώκοντα ἰδέαν). Such a pursuit may be taken up as a form of recreation when one has laid aside discourse concerning eternal things; it is a moderate and sensible form of play (59c7–d2). A common thread here is the contrast between knowledge and discourse about the sensible world with knowledge and discourse about the intelligible and eternal. We may conclude that Plato/Timaos uses the phrase *eikos mythos* when he wants the reader to keep in mind specifically the problematic nature

<sup>60</sup> A. E. Taylor 1928 takes a different approach to the problem of verification and provisionality. In his view, the cosmology is a myth in that it is the nearest approximation that can provisionally made to the exact truth (59). Since the cosmology is provisional, it will have to be revised as further knowledge, perhaps arising from a firmer experimental basis, becomes available (see, e.g., 309, 363–4, 417). As Cornford 1937: 29 remarks, however, Taylor imputes to Plato the modern attitude that there is an exact truth to physics. We have seen already that exact truth is precisely what Plato denies to physics.

of the cosmology as an account of the sensible world. An *eikos logos*, while not to be distinguished at the level of content, is a less freighted locution.<sup>61</sup>

There is no systematic distinction between the use of *mythos* and *logos* in the cosmological section of the dialogue.<sup>62</sup> Let us summarise our results so far. The cosmology is a likely account of the creation of and forces at work in the universe. Likelihood is all that can be claimed for it, both because of the limitations of language itself and because of the nature of the subject matter. The problematic status of the account is signalled by referring to it as a *mythos*, but there is considerable slippage between this term and *logos*. Given the other instances of *mythos* used to describe philosophical theory in the late dialogues, this comes as no surprise. Moreover, the status of the myth in the *Timaeus* is just as 'hedged' as in the middle dialogues. In his rich examination of disorderly motion in the dialogue, Vlastos suggested that the *Timaeus* is unique among Plato's myths, since it does not, as others do, disavow the scientific seriousness of major features, or contain mythological elements such as underworld and chthonic deities.<sup>63</sup> Yet Timaios does disavow the seriousness of the account by calling it 'play' (59d2) and by denying stability to the language he uses to construct it. The standard of scientific probability is paramount for Timaios, and the systematic scientific elaboration of the myth does mark a progression from the narrative elaboration of the middle dialogues, where the myths drew on a mixture of ethical presuppositions and logical argumentation. We should not, however, forget that Timaios' narrative premises are based upon ethical and religious criteria, as when he begins his account of the creation by stating that the Demiurge was good, and therefore decided to make the world as much like himself as it could be (29e1–3, compare 29a2–6).

What has changed since the middle period is that philosophical myth and philosophical exposition are coextensive to a much greater degree. Whereas the middle dialogues cast doubt upon the literal truth of inset mythological accounts, the *Timaeus* casts that same doubt on the cosmology that forms the largest part of the dialogue. The content and systematisation of myth may have changed since the middle period, but

<sup>61</sup> When Timaios wants to refer to the cosmology as a whole, he will generally either call it a *mythos*, as he does in the examples discussed above, or refer to it as 'words/an account about the whole' (λόγος/λόγοι περὶ τοῦ παντός): 27c4; 47a3; 88e4; 92c4. The latter generalising description looks to content of the narrative, not to the status of the account.

<sup>62</sup> So Guthrie 1978: 250. <sup>63</sup> Vlastos [1939]/1965: 380–2.

its status remains the same. We are in a paradoxical situation where philosophical/mythological material approaches 'science', but where this 'scientific' presentation is subjected to a more generalised critique than before.

The *Timaeus* and *Critias* present a series of nested levels of myth corresponding to varying levels of truth and usage. At the lowest level we have the tales of heroic genealogy told by Solon to the Egyptian priests and subsequently undermined. This use of myth has the lowest truth content and corresponds to popular uses of myth unpurified by philosophy. The next level is that of philosophical myth meant to instruct. This level corresponds to the Noble Lie of the *Republic* and is represented by the myth of Atlantis. This myth is proposed as a charter myth for a reformed Athenian society. It is not undermined explicitly by any of the characters in the dialogue; nevertheless, its status as a festival composition and useful falsehood is apparent to the reader. The last level is that of theoretical *mythos* which encompasses philosophical discourse about the sensible world. This is the level of Timaios' cosmology. In this instance it is the narrator who explicitly hedges the truth status of his account. His recognition that the cosmology is at best an approximation and is thus a story (however rigorously based) justifies its description as a *mythos* and is intended to block the kind of critical naiveté that would aim for unattainable precision and seriousness in an account of the physical world.<sup>64</sup>

Paradoxically, then, the more 'scientific' account is described in a cautious formulation as a likely myth/account, and the more obviously fabricated story is marked by insistence on its 'truth'. Both the Atlantis myth and Timaios' cosmology intentionally confound the boundaries between *mythos* and *logos*. The permeability of boundaries underlines the importance of context in evaluating the status of any Platonic myth. The contrast here is between a social 'Noble Lie' (though one located in a dialectical context) and a (dialectically defined) methodological myth.<sup>65</sup> The series of discursive Russian dolls examined above encourages the realisation that all three levels of *mythos* are subject to higher level critique of their truth content. At what point might we be expected to

<sup>64</sup> Cornford 1937: 30 aptly compares the cosmology to Parmenides' *Doxa* as an account that may come closer to the truth than others but that cannot be a literal statement of physical laws.

<sup>65</sup> I am grateful to Christopher Gill for this last formulation. Osborne 1996 presents a different contrast between the status of the narratives in the *Timaeus* and *Critias*. Whereas Kritias (naively) supposes he can find a correct set of words that would match historical reality, Timaios uses language 'not as a pictorial imitation of the particular reality of the sensible world but as a world with a meaning of its own, structured to match the world of the senses' (208). This distinction is suggestive; I would attribute it to the different purposes (from Plato's point of view) of the two accounts.

bring the series to a close? We have Timaios' word for it that even a philosophical account of the intelligible world will be subject to the deficiencies inherent in all language. It too will be a *mythos*, although to a lesser extent.

The slippage between *mythos* and *logos* is emblematic of the gap between the intelligible and the sensible world in the realm of language. In middle dialogues such as the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias*, slippage was contextually driven, by the subtleties of Protagorean argumentation and by Sokrates' desire to make an impression upon Kallikles. In the methodological dialogues, philosophical theories began to be described as *mythoi*, although these were theories under siege. *Mythos* in the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus* drew attention to theory as a constructed quasi-narrative account. This is even more explicit in the *Timaeus* because of the emphasis placed on the status and (wayward) progression of the narrative. Does a philosophical account exist that is not, in some sense, a *mythos*? What might this account look like and how can it be achieved? It is hard to imagine an account of the intelligible world totally divorced from all that is sensible.

Such an account is never presented in the Platonic corpus. Earlier we reviewed the reasons for thinking that it could never be reduced to writing and might indeed be incapable of linguistic expression at all. I have argued that the myths of Plato's middle period have a strong connection with the moment of synoptic philosophical insight so eloquently described in the *Seventh Letter*. The scope of this vision is broadly ethical; it centres upon the soul and its proper relationship to the Forms and the life of excellence. The intelligible realm is indicated through image and metaphor. The reservations that surround this shadowy description point to difficulties in the linguistic expression of the intelligible, sketch out areas of uncertainty and elision. The question then becomes, 'Where do we go from here?' We grant that linguistic expression is a perilous adventure. We allow myth to stand for both the peril and the potential achievements of the philosophical project. Nevertheless, it would be defeatist to allow the fallibility of language to block further progress in philosophical expression. Once we have gained a synoptic view of the metaphysical world through philosophical intuition, we must slow down and lay the groundwork for an approach to this world that will be more austere and 'scientific'. This approach will be the long and divine account that the *Phaedrus* avoided in favour of the shorter and more human one (246a4–6). The later methodological dialogues are the first steps in this project.



Here is one reason why the nature of the interlocutors changes in the later dialogues. Obstreperous sophists and their pupils are replaced by tractable philosophical neophytes and experienced intellectuals who share Socratic/Platonic ethical premises. There is a sense of defined aim towards which the discussion moves and which is effected by the stern application of collection and division or Timaeac mathematics. There is much talk about the conditions for knowledge, or for truth in language, or for political excellence, but no narrative account of these subjects. This emphasis on the conditions for truth, knowledge, and so on, and its corresponding avoidance of narrative and the 'big picture', is reflected in the preference for paradigm rather than full-scale myth in the methodological dialogues. The only myth in the methodological dialogues, that of the *Statesman*, is a relative failure because it tries to jump the gun and give a magnified narrative account of the statesman before the necessary conditions for statesmanship have been worked out. The narrative accounts of Parmenides and other early philosophers are subjected to a similar critique. They take the details for granted and do not define their terms, and thus they are philosophical stories, *mythoi*, which give only the illusion of knowledge.

When we do meet philosophical myths in the late period, the scale of their presentation is larger than that of the embedded myths of the middle period and the failed myth of the statesman in the *Statesman*. The myths of the *Timaeus* and *Critias* take up their entire dialogues (or, we assume, would have done so had the *Critias* been completed). This is the result of a perception that once one has embarked on a narrative, one must allow it to run its course. It needs to have a head, as Timaios remarks (69b1–2).<sup>66</sup> No wonder that embedded myths have difficulty coexisting with methodological discussion. They are incommensurate. Even so, we are aware as we read the *Timaeus* that the account given is not a full one, but is tailored to the context. In this respect, the *Timaeus* takes its place with the other late dialogues that stress the incompleteness of the discussion at hand. We have already seen how the discussion of Protagorean relativism in the *Theaetetus* looks to and demands the examination of monism in the *Sophist*. The *Statesman*, too, is part of a larger series of conversations on the definition of the sophist, statesman, and philosopher. Most notably, the *Philebus* ends as Sokrates and Protarkhos continue a discussion from which the reader is excluded. Everyone

<sup>66</sup> Compare *Grg.* 505d1. For a discussion of κεφαλ- vocabulary in Plato, see Ford 1994: 202–3.

agrees that Sokrates' remarks on pleasure are 'most true', but, in the last sentence of the dialogue, Protarkhos continues 'There's only a little left, Sokrates. I don't think you will give up before we do, and I will remind you of the remaining issues' (67b11–13). Discussion is always partial, always incomplete, but there is a sense of progress towards a goal whose nature has been sketched. As we proceed, we must continue to acknowledge that language is imperfect and our task ongoing. As long as we keep this caveat in mind, we can avoid the dangers of philosophical overconfidence. The use of *mythos*-vocabulary represents such an acknowledgement. In the middle period this awareness was directed at the provisionality and metaphoric quality of our vision of the metaphysical. In the late period caution has been extended to the description of the sensible world. Conversely, the metaphysical realm now seems potentially more accessible to description.

#### CONCLUSION: WAS THE MYTH SAVED?

I conclude my discussion of Platonic myth by studying Plato's use of a proverbial phrase: 'the myth was lost' (ὁ μῦθος ἀπώλετο). This proverb is thematically linked both to the problem of completing a discourse, and to the problematic nature of Platonic myth. Its deployment by Plato reflects and comments on both these areas.

The earliest attested use of the proverb is in fifth-century comedy.<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately no context has been preserved and no conclusions can therefore be drawn about the way in which it was used. Its proverbial status does seem secure, however. Three later interpretations of the proverb exist in the Platonic scholia. The first comments: 'a proverb applied to those who do not bring their narrative to an end' (scholion on *Tht.* 164d8–9). The second states that the proverb 'is used by those who are saying something to people who are not paying attention' (scholion on *Phlb.* 14a3–4). The third is that of the Neoplatonist Proclus:

It was the custom for many people to apply to myths the saying 'the myth was lost', because they wished to show that in fact myths say what is not, since they are fictional, and the moment they are spoken they are not. Plato, however, both here and elsewhere, says entirely the opposite. He says that his myths both save and are saved – and very reasonably so. They are the interpreters of the things that are, and because of this they are useful to those that hear them. They lead those that believe in them spontaneously to the

<sup>67</sup> Krates, *Lamia* (frag. 25 Kassel–Austin); Kratinos, *Drapetides* (frag. 63 Kassel–Austin).

truth of being, although they teach without probability and demonstration. It is as if they harmonise with our infallible preconceptions about things.<sup>68</sup>

Proclus' exegesis clearly is designed to bring the proverb into line with his own theorising. The other two scholia emphasise wasted effort; either the audience of the myth is not paying attention, or the narrator does not complete his narrative. Issues of context and reception are paramount. It does no good to tell a story if you cannot finish it or if your audience is not paying attention. In the philosophical realm, the inattentive audience is represented by people like Kallikles in the *Gorgias*: although he does listen, he refuses to 'get with the programme' and immerse himself in the intellectual world presumed by Sokrates' 'story' (even when logically compelled).

The question of completeness brings us back to concerns about whether a narrative framework (whether of a myth or a literary dialogue) can capture adequately the complexity of philosophical enquiry. We have seen that there is an increasing emphasis in the late period on the partial nature of the investigations conducted in the dialogues. This is accompanied by a refusal of closure on the level of content, and sometimes on the level of form. We have seen that philosophical argumentation can be called *mythos* in this period, and that these late arguments are sometimes in danger of being dismissed before they have been fully elaborated. In fact, 'saving' a myth or allowing it to perish functions analogously to saving or losing a *logos*. The range of meaning covered by the Greek verb 'save' (σώζω) is wide. One can save anything from a life to a city and the saving in question can be either physical or spiritual (*Euthphr.* 14b4; *Crito* 44c1). When used in the middle voice, the verb can mean 'to remember' (*Tht.* 163d3); there is thus a sense in which saving a myth is the same thing as remembering it. When used in legal contexts, it can come to mean something very close to 'acquit'.<sup>69</sup> If a *mythos* or a *logos* is saved, there may be an implication that it has been judged in the court of reason and found acceptable. To speak of saving in the context of a myth may thus address anything from questions of traditional preservation to ethical salvation to argumentative effectiveness and consistency.

<sup>68</sup> *In R.* 2, 354.24–355.7. This interpretation is summarised and simplified in the scholia. There seems to be some difficulty in the construction of the Greek at 355.3: ὁφέλιμοι τῶν ἀκουόντων ὑπάρχουσιν.

<sup>69</sup> Thus, for example, *Lysias* 13.36; 19.6. In *Lysias* it is always a person who is saved/acquitted, but it is no great stretch to conceive of a Platonic argument on trial. See especially Sokrates' comparison of the defence of the argument for the immortality of the soul to the defence speech at his trial (*Phd.* 63b1–2: χρή με πρὸς ταῦτα ἀπολογήσασθαι ὥσπερ ἐν δικαστηρίῳ; cf. 63b4–5, 63e8–9, 69d7–e5).

The most famous instance ‘saving the myth’ in Plato is *Resp.* 621b8–c2, the conclusion of the dialogue and the passage that gave rise to Proclus’ comments on Platonic myth quoted above. Sokrates has just finished the narration of the Myth of Er: Er returns to life after having seen the wonders of the underworld. Sokrates then makes his final comment:

And so, Glaukon, the myth was saved and did not perish, and it could save us, if we believe in it, and if we cross safely the River of Forgetfulness and do not defile our souls.

We start in the realm of oral tradition: the myth is saved (remembered) because Er returns to the world above to tell his story. The next stage emphasises the moral resonance of the story: this is a myth that will bring us spiritual salvation if we believe it. We must remember the lessons we learn in this life so that we may apply them to the next, and this is achieved in the myth by drinking from the River of Heedlessness only as much as one has to (621a5). Souls carried away by their thirst drink more than they should and, to varying degrees, forget what they have learned. Those who wisely drink only the measure assigned are ‘saved by their intelligence’ (σωζομένους, 621a8). Those who are saved remember more; the connection between saving and memory that is enacted in the movement from active to middle voice is re-enacted in the myth. The myth will save us if we remember it, and in the interior world of the myth memory is a result of being saved (by wisdom). The oral tradition that ensures the continuing reception of mythological material in Greek culture, and which was so profoundly suspected by Plato, is transmuted into an internal spiritual tradition that overleaps the bounds of a specific culture and guides the soul on its journey through eternity. This move from external to internal mirrors the transformation of Platonic myth relative to its traditional counterpart. It speaks to the individual soul in a specific context, rather than to the collectivity.

The conclusion of the *Republic* is the only place in Plato where the proverb of losing the myth is applied to material that is specifically mythological. All other instances of play on the proverb apply to argument that may or may not be assimilated to myth. Let us start with an example that illustrates nicely the personification of philosophical argument and its assimilation to a living being that can die or be preserved.<sup>70</sup> In the *Phaedo*, Sokrates’ first argument for the immortality of the soul has met with opposition. He banters with Phaedo, teasing him that he will cut off his hair after Sokrates’ death. More is at stake

<sup>70</sup> See further Louis 1945: 43–5; Brisson 1982: 73–4.

than his own death, however: 'Both you and I shall cut off our hair today, if our *logos* dies and we cannot revive it. If I were you and the argument escaped me, I would swear an oath like the Argives, not to cut my hair until I renewed the fight and conquered the argument of Simmias and Kebes' (89b9–c4). The parallelism between Sokrates' fate and the potential fate of the argument underlines the significance of the philosophical action. If the argument for immortality succeeds, Sokrates can look forward to being born again or transported to regions of bliss. If they fail to revive the argument, not only will Sokrates die, but he cannot anticipate survival or rebirth. Sokrates' preservation depends on the preservation of the argument.

The *Republic* underscores the political implications of saving the *logos*. The children who are to be trained as the guardians of the ideal city must imitate only virtuous men. Acting in accord with the principle that the young guardians must only concentrate on what is conducive to their successful education is described by Sokrates as 'preserving the *logos*' (εἰ ἄρα τὸν πρῶτον λόγον διασώσομεν, 395b8). The educational system of the *Republic* is designed to preserve correct beliefs and characters in the citizens. The class of soldiers will preserve (σώσει, 429b9) the belief that the things they should fear are the things the law-giver has told them. Courage is therefore a kind of 'preservation' (σωτηρίαν, 429c5) of the appropriate lesson on what is and what is not dreadful.<sup>71</sup> By implication, it will save the soldiers and the city, both morally and physically. The appropriate lessons concerning courage will be instilled in the potential soldiers through myth, and preserved through memory (386b8–c1).

To argue in agreement with certain hypotheses is to 'save' or 'preserve' them. There are times, however, when such argumentation can lead one into trouble. Thus the argument in the *Republic* about the equality of women leads Sokrates to remark that he might seem to be all at sea in defending his law on this subject (453c10–d7). In this situation Sokrates must try to swim and be saved from the argument of his detractors (σώζεσθαι ἐκ τοῦ λόγου), or look for salvation (σωτηρίαν) from a dolphin or something equally unusual (453d9–11).<sup>72</sup> A similar situation occurs in the *Philebus*, in a passage considered above for its

<sup>71</sup> Compare 429c9–d1: σωτηρίαν τὸ ἐν τε λύπαις ὄντα διασώζεσθαι αὐτὴν καὶ ἐν ἡδοναῖς, and also 442b11–c3; 443e5–6.

<sup>72</sup> At 457b7–c2 Sokrates' success in establishing the correctness of his programme for the women of his city is compared to escaping being overwhelmed by a wave (compare *Phaedo* 99c8–d2). See also Louis 1945: 50–2.

assimilation of *logos* to *mythos*. The proverb of losing the myth is foreshadowed when Sokrates objects to the eristic manipulations of his interlocutor. If they continue in this childish vein, their argument will digress and perish (ὁ λόγος ἡμῖν ἐκπεσὼν οἰχήσεται, 13d6).<sup>73</sup> It becomes explicit when Sokrates contrasts the assertion that the various parts of knowledge are dissimilar with the equally reasonable-sounding objection that knowledge is never unlike knowledge. If one were to privilege the latter assertion over the former, 'Our *logos*, like a *mythos*, would perish and be lost, and we would be saved at the price of absurdity' (ὁ λόγος ὥσπερ μῦθος ἀπολόμενος οἰχόιτο, αὐτοὶ δὲ σωζοίμεθα ἐπὶ τινος ἄλογίας, 14a3–5). In both the *Republic* and the *Philebus* passages, the difficulty of following one's hypotheses through to their logical conclusion tempts the speakers to abandon them. Nevertheless, in both instances abandoning the argument would be wrong. The important thing is not to save oneself embarrassment, but to save the *logos* (note that in the *Philebus*, saving oneself is explicitly equated with *alogia*, absurdity). Consistency is crucial, at whatever cost, and has a distinct moral flavour.<sup>74</sup> The *Crito* teaches that it can cost us our lives. Yet the preservation of consistency and the willingness to follow an argument to its end is the means for our salvation; by saving the argument we save ourselves.

It is not always one's own argument that must be saved. Sokrates' preliminary refutation of Protagorean relativism was also described in terms of our proverb: 'And so Protagoras' *mythos* was lost, and at the same time so was your theory that knowledge and perception are the same thing' (μῦθος ἀπώλετο ὁ Πρωταγόρειος, 164d8–9). As in the *Philebus*, the proverb casts its shadow on other evaluations of argumentative consistency. A little earlier Sokrates had raised as an objection to the theory that knowledge is perception the consequence that, if this were

<sup>73</sup> The verb ἐκπίπτω is also used of shipwrecked men cast ashore. The nautical metaphor is latent in Sokrates' discussion in 13b–14a.

<sup>74</sup> Other examples of 'saving the *logos/mythos*': (1) *Ti.* 68c7–d2: the hypothesis that colours are derived from other colours by mixing 'preserves the likely *mythos*' (διασώζει τὸν εἰκότα μῦθον). (2) *Leg.* 645b1–2: on the comparison of humans to puppets. The Athenian Stranger equates the 'golden cord' of the puppet with the drawing power of the law, and comments, 'In this way, the *mythos* of virtue would be preserved, that is, the *mythos* that we are really puppets' (ὁ μῦθος ἀρετῆς σεσωμένος ἂν εἴη). The moral force of saving the myth is strongly felt here. (3) *Ti.* 48d4–e1: Timaios calls on god the saviour (σωτήρα) for help as he prepares to introduce the Receptacle. God will save him, he hopes, in his strange narrative, and bring him safely to the belief of the probable (πρὸς τὸ τῶν εἰκότων δόγμα διασώζειν ἡμᾶς). Here again we have discomfort in the face of difficult material and the determination to carry the account to its conclusion. (4) *Ti.* 56a1: by assigning the equilateral triangle to the element of earth, we preserve the likely *logos* (τὸν εἰκότα λόγον διασώζομεν).

so, it would entail that we forget things when we close our eyes. This is a strange conclusion to draw, but it is necessary if one is to save the consistency of the argument (εἰ σώσομεν τὸν πρόσθε λόγον); otherwise, it perishes (164a1–2). When Sokrates later speaks in the persona of Protagoras defending his man-measure doctrine, he uses the same idiom: ‘You must put up with being a measure, whether you like it or not, because in this way my argument is saved’ (σώζεται γὰρ ἐν τούτοις ὁ λόγος οὗτος, 167d4–5). In order to give Protagoras’ theory a fair hearing, it is necessary to explore all its implications and not to reject it too soon. To do so would be to abandon the *mythos* before its conclusion (as the scholiast on this passage, quoted above, comments). Even though Protagoras’ theory will be rejected in the end, a cheap and dismissive victory would be a betrayal of dialectic method, with its own moral consequences.

The range of different idioms constructed around ‘saving’ a discourse reflects the scope and interaction of Platonic *mythos* and *logos*. A *mythos* is a narrative. It has a life of its own, demands completion and elaboration, demands that the audience enter into its world. If we fail to do so, the *mythos* is lost. Emotional participation makes *mythos* a powerful tool; the right one can affect our pattern of action. This is why Plato installs *mythoi* in his educational system in the *Republic*. Dialectical argumentation is described by *logos* (although the range of *logos* is not restricted to dialectic). *Logos* too demands that we must follow where it leads, both within the realm of the discussion and in our daily lives. By so doing, we preserve the coherence of the argument and our own intellectual respectability and move towards ‘salvation’. Because dialectical argument, *qua* philosophical story, can be assimilated to *mythos* (especially in the late period), saving the *mythos* and the *logos* can amount to the same thing.

Let us take this a step further. The representation of dialectical *logos* is, from the literary point of view, a *mythos*. That is, it is a story Plato tells us about philosophical discussion. Plato never allows us to forget the constraints imposed by the literary frame upon the expression of thought and upon the (supposed) reporting of philosophical positions. Hence the insistence on the partial and preliminary nature of the discussion, and in some cases the complex interplay of framing narrative with the main body of the dialogue.<sup>75</sup> These implicit reservations with which Plato surrounds his dialogues are structurally equivalent to the

<sup>75</sup> See Halperin 1992: 93–6.

explicit reservations we find associated with Platonic *mythoi*. One function of the employment of and the appeal to *mythos* is to keep in the reader's mind the awareness that such tales speculate (but reasonably) about realms concerning which no certainty has yet been attained. There is an even greater methodological significance. *Mythos* marks off a realm of discourse in which language serves only as a metaphorical expression of reality, both because Plato says so and because this is the philosophical baggage with which *mythos* has been loaded since the time of the Presocratics. But by blurring the boundaries between *mythos* and *logos*, by tying myth so firmly into the philosophical context, by making it arise from and reflect dialectic, and finally, by sometimes labelling philosophical theory as *mythos*, Plato forces us to realise that all language is a story that interprets reality, with greater and lesser degrees of success. Precise though the dialectic of the late period may be, it only lays the groundwork for understanding. No one has yet accomplished the philosophical project that the dialogues lay out (at least, no one is said to have done so), and there is no telling the extent to which philosophical insight may or may not be capable of precise linguistic expression. Whatever our intuitions about this last question, the interplay between *mythos* and *logos* is evidence that the goal is not achieved in any of the dialogues and is not meant to be. We have the evidence of the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter* that literary dialogues, and possibly language in general, cannot reproduce philosophical insight, although they may play (seriously) at doing so. The interaction between *mythos* and *logos* was never a question of literary elaboration or slumming for the non-analytically minded. It is an exercise in self-conscious reflection on the nature and possibilities of philosophical language. If we remember this, we may save ourselves from credulity and dogmatism in our interpretation of the dialogues and of the world around us.

What we choose to save in any instance is indicative of our approach to the world. Plato chooses to save the argument, whereas Aristotle chooses to save the phenomena, that is, the appearances of the sensible world.<sup>76</sup> Aristotle criticises both Plato and the Eleatics for wanting to 'refer everything to certain defined beliefs' (*De Caelo* 306a5 ff.) and for

<sup>76</sup> My thinking on this topic has been stimulated by Nussbaum 1982. Rather than multiply footnotes I shall indicate here the two places where I found the paper suggestive: p. 277 (Aristotle's criticism of Plato and the Eleatics for following the argument rather than the 'appearances'), and pp. 286–90 (acceptance of monism or the Platonic Forms cuts us off from normal human conversation). Aristotle himself does not use the formulation 'saving the phenomena'; it appears repeatedly in Simplicius' commentary on Aristotle's *De Caelo*, and also in Plutarch, Theon of Smyrna, John Philoponus, and Proclus.



ignoring perception because they think it 'necessary to follow the argument (*logos*)' (*De Gen. et Corr.* 325a13 ff.). Plato thus rejects the world as we perceive it, as does Parmenides. This, however, as Nussbaum has remarked, has interesting consequences for the status of the philosophical discourse that expresses this rejection. It raises at least the possibility that the discourse, whether it concerns the Platonic Forms or the Eleatic One, has no referent. The use of language presumes the normal world of appearances and a human community, but this is what Plato and the Eleatics reject in order to get at the truth behind the world and behind language. Were these philosophers simply unaware of the problem? On the contrary. Philosophical *mythos* encodes and recognises this difficulty. It does not solve it, because the problem is, I think, insoluble. The only option is to admit the paradox, and *mythos* is that admission. Saving the myth is about more than narrative closure.

Anyone who suggests a philosophical function for Plato's myths must face the question: 'Would two mature philosophers in a dialogue with each other ever have occasion to use myth?'<sup>77</sup> It is a matter of the primacy (or not) of myth's pedagogic function. The question may be answered on two levels. In the realm of literary presentation, the confessed artificiality of created myth reminds the reader that the Platonic dialogue is a literary construction; real philosophy is only sketched therein. As a literary device, myth enables broad metaphysical vistas to be contained in a small space. But the problem of language, although it encompasses that of literary presentation, is larger and even more important. Is myth purely pedagogy? No more so than all dialectic is didactic dialectic.<sup>78</sup> If the arguments of the these last two chapters have any force, pedagogic or educational myth is but one type of myth, and not the most philosophical one. *Mythos* marks out content as a narrative, literary, social construct. Its penetration of philosophical discourse reminds us that language is embedded in a real and concrete world. It freights language and emphasises its fragility: all language touches the sphere of *mythos*. We must ask, then, how mature are the two philosophers of our question? Are they incarnate, or are they engaged in conversation during one of those otherworldly journeys after death? If they are earthbound intellects and speak with the tongues of men they must encode in their conversation some acknowledgement of this. If they have both attained to contemplation of the Good, their language will be as precise as may be, although we may doubt whether they would

<sup>77</sup> Hyland 1988: 251.

<sup>78</sup> Frede 1992: 208–10.

be willing to leave the contemplation of the Forms long enough to have a conversation (*Resp.* 519cd). But it will still be language and still be flawed. They would, I imagine, smile at each other, and say 'let me tell you a *story* about the Good'.

*Mythologia* must therefore take its place as an intimate and essential part of the Platonic philosophical project. It is no accident that Plato invented the word and give it conceptual shape.<sup>79</sup> It seems likely that he performed a similar role with the other words that define his enterprise, both positively and negatively: *rhetorike* (rhetoric) and *philosophia* (philosophy).<sup>80</sup> Mythology, rhetoric, philosophy: all are formed in and through language, all interpenetrate and influence each other. If studying one of them leads to an examination of the others, this is surely what Plato had in mind.

<sup>79</sup> The abstract noun *mythologia* does not occur before Plato. There are eight instances in the corpus: *Plt.* 304d1, *Phdr.* 243a4, *Hp. Ma.* 298a4, *Resp.* 382d1, 394c1, *Criti.* 110a3, *Leg.* 680d3, 752a1. He also seems to have coined the abstract noun *mythologema* (*Phdr.* 229c5, *Leg.* 663e5; cf. Philokhoros *FGrH* f 3b, 328f, frag. 109, line 5) and the adjective *mythologikos* (*Phd.* 61b5).

<sup>80</sup> On *rhetorike* see Schiappa (1991: 40–9); on *philosophia*, Nightingale (1995: 14–21).

## CHAPTER 9

### *Conclusion*

Is myth a disease of language? If so, it is one for which language has a genetic weakness. Philosophical myth strives to be the inoculation against the disease, and, as is often the case, infects the patient with a weakened and preventative strain of the illness. By introducing a particular, engineered strain of myth into philosophical discourse, the authors whom I have been considering can both acknowledge and attempt to move beyond the inherent weakness of words. They can appropriate the productions of poetic predecessors and contemporaries and reissue them in their own image, while still guarding themselves against any charge that they repeat poetic mythological mistakes. Once recognised, the fallibility of language becomes a source of opportunity. Parmenides' goddess can, in the second part of his poem, boast of the deceitful ordering created by words, while still expecting her audience to be proof against it. Meanwhile, the errors of mortal thought are mercilessly exposed in the first part, but in such a way that we are forced to question whether the language of the poem can contain the conclusions expressed.

The sophists view myth as a form of literary and cultural convention. By manipulating this convention they can advertise their intellectual expertise and attract pupils. Since the content of their teaching is rhetorical, manipulation is not only a means but an end. Manoeuvring in and through language, they display its detachment from any universal or metaphysical truth. Sometimes they do so explicitly, as in Gorgias' disquisition on *logos* in the *Encomium of Helen*, and sometimes implicitly, by constructing an ironic tension between a mythological situation and the words spoken in that situation. If language were infallible, there would be no opportunity for persuasion, and persuasion, as Gorgias remarks, is deception.

Plato is committed, for at least the majority of his adult life, to a world of transcendent Forms that give meaning to language. But nothing in

the sensible world ever instantiates the Forms perfectly. As we read the dialogues, we sense the philosopher striving for ever-increasing degrees of linguistic precision, but always with the recognition that his project is incomplete and his discourse imperfect. Plato does not wish to mislead his readers that the life of philosophy can be contained in written words (and perhaps in words of any kind); this is why he writes dialogues, and it is why he includes myths and mythological allusions in them. They adumbrate the (currently) inexpressible, remind us of its presence, and keep alive the awareness that philosophical discourse itself is a constructed account of reality. Whereas we tend to say that an account is not a myth if one believes it, Plato would say that an account is not a myth if one can prove it. No Platonic dialogue, however, presents an infallible account. One doubts that such a narrative exists.

After starting as the rejected ‘other’ of philosophy, myth takes its place at the heart of the philosophical process in the works of the thinkers studied here. It acts both as foil and as method. Myth and method might seem to be an unlikely pairing. Nevertheless, in this ‘negative image’ of myth as traditionally understood, we can see a profound understanding of the transformative powers of discourse. The paradoxical nature of the combination is due to the fact that we have long taken ancient (and modern) philosophers too much at their word, believing that the significance of myth must be confined to its role as foil. I hope to have shown, however, that some philosophical practice does not, and does not desire to, restrict itself to such a reductive understanding of the power of myth. The richness and resonance of philosophical literary practice is often under-appreciated. Yet it is intimately connected to the powers and possibilities of myth as explored in this book. Myth and mythological analogy enable the sensuous play of words and narrative situations within philosophical texts, such that narrative construct resonates with the philosophical message. ‘Mythological’ philosophy teaches the important lesson that philosophical knowledge cannot shine transparently through the medium in which it is expressed. *Mythos* is the condition of the world we inhabit.

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