

PRAESTIGIAE PLATONIS: THE CAVERNOUS PUPPETSHOW

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ABSTRACT. The paper deals with Plato's Allegory of the Cave at the beginning of the 7th book of the *Republic*, focusing on the two lowest stages of the Cave (and the corresponding parts of the Line from the simile in the Sixth book), occupied, respectively, by 'prisoners and puppeteers'; the identity of these groups is questioned, along the lines set by J. Wilberding in his homonymously entitled article. The puppeteers and their show are examined with regard to the lexical peculiarities of Plato's text, in particular his usage of *thauma* and the derived *thaumatopoiros*. The overall ironical, playful character of the Allegory is emphasized, calling for cautious reading beyond its apparent face value. A Russian term *vertep*, meaning both 'a cave' and 'a portable puppetshow', may prove itself helpful in approaching the sense Plato actually intended with his Allegory.

KEYWORDS: Plato, the *Republic*, Allegory of the Cave, *vertep*.

Plato's Allegory of the Cave breaching the Seventh book of the *Republic* has been discussed and commented upon since antiquity, mostly in conjunction with the Line simile which closes the previous book.

The question around which the majority of discussions of the Cave revolves is that of its parallelism to the Line. This question can be understood as having two parts: do both the Cave and the Line have four parts or stages, and if so, is there one-to-one correspondence between the parts of the Line and the stages of the Cave? At present, the orthodox interpretation answers each of these questions affirmatively.¹

To me, of immediate interest are the two lower stages, played upon, resp., by 'prisoners and puppeteers,' as the title of the above quoted paper by J. Wilberding runs. The author would challenge the easy-going answer to the implied question about the identity of the two groups, viz. the multitude of the polis, 'ordinary

¹ Wilberding 2004, 117, cf. the note *ad loc.* with an expansive list of supporters and dissenters of this view in recent scholarship.

men' prone to unreflective beliefs as the prisoners vs. 'legislators and politicians; poets, painters, and musicians; sophists and orators' as the puppeteers.² Claiming from the Line simile the states of εἰκασία and πίστις for the two lowest stages and reassessing the account of εἰκασία to adequately suit both metaphors – with due regard for the often overlooked 'guessing game' in which the prisoners are engaged (R. 516c8–d4, e7–8) –, Wilberding cogently sets the Allegory of the Cave in the proper perspective: the puppetshow corresponds to the multitude of citizens, craftsmen most of them, harboring 'unreflective' inherited opinions, while the lowest stage belongs to 'educated' personages – politicians, sophists, and the like – who but form opinions about opinions ('shadows on the wall'), with never a care about 'real things' (still a far cry from the Form of the Good), or rather without believing in their existence. It is them who are the prisoners in sooth, the self-inflicted victims of manipulation instead of manipulators.

Plato's writings – the *Republic* probably above all others – are saturated with subtle irony, sly suggestions and baits for the unwary reader favouring hands-down directness or blunt preconceptions of all kinds. Thus, by readily identifying puppeteers from the Cave with today's politicians or showmen, such readers fall easy prey to their own misapprehension – which was effectively set in place by the elaborate texture of Plato's text. So it is Plato who is pulling the strings, toying with his readers, like the gods in Lg. 644d7–e4:

let's imagine that each of us living beings is a puppet of the gods (θαύμα... θεῶν). Whether we have been constructed to serve as their plaything, or for some serious reason, is something beyond our ken, but what we certainly do know is this: we have these emotions in us, which act like cords or strings (νεύρα ἢ σμήρινθοί τινες) and tug us about; they work in opposition, and tug against each other to make us perform actions that are opposed correspondingly; back and forth we go across the boundary line where vice and virtue meet.³

We encounter here a couple of rather embrangling expressions with uncertain or equivocal meanings provoking misinterpretations or calling for *scholia*. Such deliberate awkwardness – whether lexical or syntactical – is an artistic device of Plato's, as often as not used as a *nota bene* mark, a warning of a snare lurking in the text.⁴ It's up to the reader to blithely walk into the trap by taking the text at its face value, or be up to it and appreciate the text's intricate imbroglio. Skipping σμήρινθος (which replaces the common μήρινθος in Plato's *Laws* and hence is of

² Wilberding 2004, 119–120, with scholars' names and references in notes.

³ Translation by Trevor J. Saunders.

⁴ Cf. my remarks on Plato's word usage in R. 540e (Garadja 2017).

interest to Hesychius and other lexicographers), we come up to θαύμα (resumed in the same sense of ‘puppet’ in the Allegory of the Cave).

Θαύμα is used profusely by Plato in a number of dialogues in all its varying meanings: 1. *wonder, marvel*; 2. *wonder, astonishment*; 3. *puppet* (sg.), *puppetshow, toy theatre* (pl.), also *trick* (Sph. 233a: τὸ τῆς σοφιστικῆς δυνάμεως θαύμα).⁵ Neither is uncommon in other ancient writers, including the sense of ‘puppetshow’ for θαύματα, with miscellaneous derivatives – ‘mountebank-gambols’, ‘juggler-booths’, ‘menageries’, even ‘mechanical devices’ (LSJ). Still, Timaeus the Sophist feels the need for a clarification: θαύματα· νευρόσπαστα.⁶

Let us recall the ways and trappings of Plato’s cavernous puppetshow (R. 514b2–515a3):

Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them [= the prisoners fixed in their places by bonds that prevent them from turning their heads around]. Also behind them, but on higher ground, there is a path stretching between them and the fire. Imagine that along this path a low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets (θαύματα). (...) Then also imagine that there are people along the wall, carrying all kinds of artifacts (σκεύη τε παντοδαπά) that project above it – statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material. And, as you’d expect, some of the carriers are talking, and some are silent.⁷

It is but shadows of these θαύματα that the prisoners can see cast by the fire behind them on the wall in front of themselves (515a7–8). There’s quite a number of enlightening details to be found in this description. Wilberding, for instance, detects here confirmation for his ‘unorthodox’ interpretation of puppeteers, viz. that ‘they stand for the group to which the politicians, sophists, and poets cater – namely, the multitude consisting in large part of the polis’s many craftsmen’.⁸ But

⁵ Translations according to LSJ. Cf. respective renderings in Latin: 1. *miraculum*; 2. *admiratio*; 3. *praestigiae* (TGL), and French: 1. *prodige*; 2. *étonnement*; 3. *marionette* (Des Places 1964).

⁶ Bonelli 2007: 151. Cf. Ruhnken’s crisp definition of Plato’s θαύματα: *praestigiae circulatorum, imagunculas nervis moventium, ut imperitum populorum stupore defigerent*. Further on this scholar makes a point to distinguish between θαυματοποιοί ‘who would stun ignorant people to stupor with their small string-driven images’ and those ‘who construct αὐτόματα and other mechanical works’ (Ruhnken 1789, 140–1).

⁷ Translation by G.M.A. Grube, revised by C.D.C. Reeve.

⁸ Wilberding 2004: 128; there follows a brief discussion of ‘σκεύη – artefacts or equipment’, but cf. my analysis of σκεῦος (sg. for σκεύη) and derived σκευή ‘theatrical paraphernalia, costume, etc.’ in Garadja 2017: 77–80; Plato’s Urtext may have sported at R. 514c1 σκευάς τε παντοδαπὰς ὑπερέχοντας instead of σκεύη, etc., notwithstanding the lack of evidence for such a conjecture in the manuscripts.

what strikes me most is that there is no mention of *strings* here in connection with puppets (νεύρα ἢ σμήρινθοί τινες, as in Lg. 644e2), so Timaeus' gloss doesn't fit in.

Plato's θαύματα the shadows of which (515c2: τὰς τῶν σκευαστῶν σκιάς) the prisoners observe appear to be neither string-driven marionettes, nor glove-puppets like Punch and Judy. They are *carried* behind the screen by operators who alternately talk and keep silence – 'as you'd expect' (οἶον εἰκός). This is where the Russian *βερμεν* comes in handy by way of analogy. It refers to a portable puppetshow performed on Christmas in remembrance of Nativity. There are generally two stages inside a two-tiered box (the upper for Heaven, the lower for Hell), inside which the puppets – dolls sitting on lengthy pins – are moved by manipulators holding those pins along slits cut in the bottom of each stage, to and fro. The personages, facing the audience, interact with each other only via the public: the performer would proclaim a puppet's monologue (or just plain self-presentation) and fall silent, expecting a response from the spectators – οἶον εἰκός (a trait of Medieval mystery plays to which *βερμεν* goes back to).

By a stroke of luck, the primary sense of *βερμεν* is 'a cave, den'. Then a Russian-speaking reader may well descry in Plato's Allegory a *βερμεν en abyme*, an abysmal theater inside another. It all may have been about pretence and illusion (as opposed to imaginative phantasy), which are the driving forces of a writer – and Plato was certainly one of the greatest, no less than he was a philosopher, and aware of the skein he was spinning. What I am hinting at here is not a *real* analogy, but an *interpretative* one.⁹ It is about how we should approach the work of such an ambidextrous writer-philosopher.

There's a lengthy train of interpretations of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, stretching from Neo-Platonists to present-day scholars. Still, there's a common strain in all of them – from religious ones (a mystical ascent to heavenly Light out of the squalid *condition humaine*) to epistemic or pedagogical (a no less mystical ascent to ultimate knowledge and dissemination of enlightenment amongst the lowly and ignorant) to political and sociological (focusing on democracy and its power games, including the obvious parallel between the puppetshow for the prisoners and today's media).¹⁰ The common preconception is that there necessarily should be something more or less real *behind* the Allegory, at the

⁹ I'm not looking for real prototypes neither for Plato's puppetshow, nor for its settings – unlike, e.g., Gocer (1999) who would link the former to the modern Turkish *Karagöz* shadow puppet theater, then to its presumed Byzantine and Ancient Greek prefigurations, and finally to Aristophanic comedy; or Ferguson (1963) and others who would point to the real Cave of Vari on Hymettus as the settings for the show.

¹⁰ Cf. Nehamas 1988, and interpreters of Straussian persuasion.

bottom of the Cave, something that we should recognize and learn for our own good and general παιδεία.

However, for a true philosopher, *engaged* in thinking as we are in living, there is nothing warranted, no achievement or failure is taken for granted, or as pending. He feels obliged to test multiple paths, and he tries them in company with his *alter ego* — a writer similarly engaged in writing —, probing, examining, weaving ‘back and forth across the boundary line’ between illusion and imagination, ignorance and knowledge, silence and utterance, strut and mask, lapse and exploit. There may be no hidden lesson to be retrieved from the Allegory, except only for this marvelous performative play in which the philosopher-writer Plato had ever been engaged.

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