Journeys in Plato's Phaedrus: Hermias' Reading of the Walk to the Ilissus

Dirk Baltzly

1 Introduction

Plato's *Phaedrus* is a dialogue of journeys, a tale of transitions. It begins with Socrates' question, 'Where to and from whence, my dear Phaedrus?' and concludes with the Socrates' decision, 'Let's go' (sc. back into the city from whence they've come). In the speech that forms its centre-piece Socrates narrates another famous journey—the descent of the soul into the body and its re-ascent to the realm of Forms through erotic madness. It is not too implausible to suppose that Plato himself saw fit to relate his powerful images of the human soul's fall and re-ascent by dramatic means that highlight the movement from one place to another. You don't have to be a Neoplatonist to think that this parallel between the movements of the teller in the drama and the psychic dynamics in the tale told is no coincidence.[1]

It is, however, characteristic of Neoplatonic readings of Plato's dialogues to take such a modest interpretive hypothesis and apply it to matters of detail in the text with relentless systematicity.[2] Most—but by no means all—modern readers regard the resulting edifice as a kind of 'hermeneutic over-kill.' While we all recognise that Plato was a very thoughtful writer who was capable of investing his dialogues with all manner of significant asides and revealing remarks, Neoplatonic readings often locate great significance in things seemingly very insignificant. They systematically connect elements within a dialogue, as well as across dialogues, or even read details of the dialogue in relation to texts like the *Chaldean Oracles* or against the backdrop of the accepted wisdom about the nature of daimones or astral bodies. Taken as a whole, the result strains credulity—at least for some of us.

1 Dorter (1971) argues that proper consideration of the dramatic backdrop of any Platonic dialogue is essential for its correct understanding and that this is especially true for the *Phaedrus*. Ferrari claims to go further by arguing that the setting of the *Phaedrus* does not merely illuminate its philosophical concerns, but actually constitutes them.

2 The only modern parallel that approximates Hermias' systematic emphasis on the details of Socrates' and Phaedrus' journey in relation to the theme of the dialogue is Philip. Wycherley attends carefully to the details of the places described in Plato's dialogue, but not so much for the purpose of interpreting the meaning of Plato's text.

 | DOI:10.1163/9789004414310_003

In what follows I consider the way in which Hermias' *Phaedrus Commentary* reads the elements of the journey that Socrates and Phaedrus take from the city to the banks of the Ilissus in terms of the psychic movements that the commentator supposes to be central to the dialogue. On his view, Socrates descends from the intellectual level that his soul normally occupies to assist Phaedrus in his ascent through progressively higher forms of beauty. According to Hermias, aspects of the psychic journeys of the two characters are symbolically represented through the description of their physical journey to the shady spot under the plane tree where the bulk of their conversation takes place.

This symbolic reading of often very minor details of Plato's dialogue will strike many readers as hermeneutic overkill. In the concluding section, I will consider a possible explanation of this kind of interpretation in terms of the transformative nature of Neoplatonic education. If Hermias and Syrianus were merely interpreting Plato's dialogues—as we moderns do, in the spirit of sober scholarship—then we might well find some of this symbolic reading gratuitous. But they read Plato with a psychagogic purpose in mind: to lead the souls of the audience upward through the grades of virtue and thus to render them more godlike.[3] Each dialogue plays a unique (or nearly unique) role in the acquisition of progressively more abstract intellectual virtues. The symbolic reading of these textual details becomes intelligible, and perhaps even in some sense justifiable, viewed against the backdrop of the psychagogic purposes for which the Neoplatonists lectured on Plato's dialogues.

2 Destinations

Plato's dialogue contains plenty of explicit travels on the part of his characters, Socrates and Phaedrus. As the very beginning of his *Commentary* makes clear, however, Hermias reads those explicit journeys against the background of *psychic* ascents and descents on the part of both men.[4]

3 Asmis agrees with those modern commentators who suppose that the theme of the dialogue is rhetoric, but adds that the conversations in the dialogue illustrate the kind of *psychogogia* involved in rhetoric (cf. *Phdr*. 260a, 271c). Hermias and the Neoplatonists, however, mean much more than this: they think that each and every Platonic dialogue plays a role in leading the soul through progressively higher virtues to likeness to god. Moreover, *psychogogia* is not merely a topic of this dialogue (as well as all others): each dialogue plays a role *psychagogic* purpose.

4 Griswold (165, 197) notes the ascent-climax-descent chronology of the *Phaedrus* and its connection to the dramatic scene of the dialogue (34). He seems to regard the journey as

> Socrates was sent down into Becoming as a service to the race of men and the souls of the young. However, since there is great diversity with respect to the characters and ways of life (*epitêdeumata*) of souls, he benefits each person differently. [He helps] the young in one way, the sophists in another, extending his hand to all and sundry, and exhorting them all to philosophy. Thus it is that he is now elevating Phaedrus, who is passionate about rhetoric, to the *true* rhetoric, i.e. philosophy.[5]
>
> 1.5–10; cf. 13.29–14.1

Thus Hermias looks for signs in Plato's text that Socrates makes an initial psychic descent to meet Phaedrus halfway. It is part of his understanding of the situation that Socrates is able to do this without ever fully abandoning his elevated position in the intellect. Like all higher causes, his *proödos* is fully consistent with remaining 'above'. Phaedrus, for his part, is progressively led upward by the beneficent Socratic guidance. This journey is simultaneously one from inferior to superior kinds of beauty and through progressively nobler kinds of eros. It begins with the (a) beauty in perception and nature, progresses to (b) beauty in *logoi*, then to (c) beauty the soul, (d) in the intellect, and (e) beauty in the gods (14.9–12). Let us now consider how Hermias reads the journey that the two characters make to the banks of the Illissus in terms of these psychic movements.

The dialogue, of course, begins with Socrates asking Phaedrus 'To where and from whence?'[6] Nothing in this opening line is too minor to be excused scrutiny by the Neoplatonic commentators. In particular, Hermias opens with a puzzle about the word order. Why does Socrates ask where Phaedrus is going first, and then where he has come from? Surely it should be 'From whence and to where?' since origins are prior to destinations.

This conundrum is given not one, but three resolutions. Hermias reads the significance of the passage in a logical manner, an ethical manner and *phys-*

---

symbolic of the philosopher's desire to both remain in *and* transcend the *polis* as part of his venture towards the divine (33–36). Sallis 106–109 also reads the journey as parallel to one of primary concerns of the dialogue: how are we to ascend towards Zeus?

5 Translations from Baltzly & Share.

6 Cf. Burnyeat. Hermias' treatment of the dialogue as a whole nicely conforms to Burnyeat's summary of Proclus' approach to the prologues of Platonic dialogues. The notion that persons/souls are "going somewhere" through the grasp of the different kinds of beauty is spelled out through the whole of Hermias' commentary. So 'to where and from whence?' is like the overture of an opera. As Burnyeat says, 'you hear themes that you know will turn out to be significant, but you have to wait for the plot to unfold in order to discover just what their significance is.' (4)

iologikôs. The ethical reading is the one that bears upon our theme of journeys. The order of Socrates' question is meant as a subtle rebuke to Phaedrus for allowing the focus of his love to shift downward to lower kinds of beauty:

> Socrates has regard for Phaedrus and says in effect: 'Where are you going? Where have you come from? You've abandoned true beauty, the beauty in divine things, and are marvelling at the beauty in speeches. Look what you've come down to and then you'll recognise where you've come from. For, just as in the case of, let us say, roads and other places, we don't seek out the earlier ones unless we come to the realization that the later ones are more difficult, in just the same way here too, Phaedrus, you can't learn what you've been snatched away from unless you recognise how far and where you have strayed. For your present wrong turning (*diamartia*), being recent, is adequate to carrying [you] back (*anagein*), by a sort of retrogression,[7] to the condition that truly befits the soul.'
>
> 16.25–17.1

Thus on Hermias' understanding of the text, Plato puts the question in the order 'from where, to where?' because he wants to indicate right from the beginning that Phaedrus is on a road to nowhere. He has not yet gone so far down that road as Lysias has. Lysias, on Hermias' reading, is entirely focused on the beauty in bodies. Phaedrus, however, is in love with something somewhat higher than corporeal beauty: speeches (cf. 12.25–30). Phaedrus' love of speeches is indicated by so subtle a sign as the word order of his reply. Instead of answering Socrates' questions in the order in which they were asked by saying, 'I'm going for a walk, having been at the house of Epicrates' he reverses the order and says first where he's *come from* and then where he is *going*. This chiastic response, likened to Homer's chiasm in *Iliad* VIII.64–65, indicates that *logoi* are the present object of Phaedrus' attention.

It is not merely Phaedrus' word order that Hermias reads in terms of the spiritual journeys of the *Phaedrus*. Phaedrus tells Socrates that he was *sitting* a long time with Lysias and now he is going for a *walk*—ostensibly on the advice of Socrates' friend Acumenus. Of course, as we find out subsequently, Phae-

7 Presumably an allusion to planetary retrogression, as when Mars appears to 'backtrack' along its previous pathway through the fixed stars. If this sounds odd, recall *Timaeus* 90d where we are told that the movements of the heavenly bodies are a paradigm to which the movements of souls should assimilate. On the meaning of this idea, see Baltzly (2016).

drus is not just walking for his health: he is going to find a quiet place where he can recite Lysias' speech privately so as to commit it to memory. Nonetheless, his willingness to go for a walk is a sign of his potential for being elevated by Socrates 'since it is appropriate for a man who has chosen to be sound in both mind and body' to undertake a walk (18.8–9). This contrasts with Phaedrus' seated posture throughout the morning. The seated posture indicates 'dallying with material things and spending time on visible beauty that is onerous (*epiponos*) and worthless.'

Phaedrus' long morning with Lysias is also absorbed into the narrative of his spiritual progress. Being occupied with lower things is hard work and time not well spent. Socrates too mentions work: he regards it as 'above all business' (*ascholias hyperteron*) to hear about Phaedrus' conversation with Lysias. But of course, philosophy is precisely opposed to work. It is the *scholê* or leisure of putting aside human things and being drawn to a purer, noetic life. Thus Socrates' uncharacteristic mention of business indicates his willingness to descend from his usual noetic leisure in order to help elevate Phaedrus from his lowly condition:

> So, since caring for the souls of the young was a concern of Socrates, he accordingly says that he puts it *above all business*,[8] [which is] equivalent to 'for your benefit I gladly descend to an emptier life and to the examination of Lysias' speech.'
>
> 20.12–15

This theme of the life amid sensible beauty as toil is revisited again at 26.26 and 27.25. Plato himself says that those who would give explanations of myths, such as that of Oreithyia, in terms of natural philosophy will need a lot of leisure time to complete the job (229e.4). So Hermias' identification of the realm of the physical with toil is not without some warrant in Plato's text.

The connection of the city with toiling amid human affairs allows Hermias to read the significance of the city in two ways. On the one hand, Phaedrus leaves the city with Socrates in order to be elevated to the beauty of soul, intellect and the gods. Lysias, of course, remains behind—being present to the conversation between Socrates and Lysias' *eromenos* only through the book that the young man carries. So the city must signify some lower spiritual condition that Lysias does not depart from. On the other hand, this outing to the country is utterly

8 From Pindar, *Isthm.*1:1 ff., sometimes translated 'above my want of leisure', or 'above all lack of leisure'. See Griswold (1986) 250, note 11 for discussion.

uncharacteristic for Socrates who never leaves the city, since it is a place where one may learn things (231d.3–5). Thus the city must also be given some sort of positive valence insofar as it is Socrates' normal haunt. The theme of toil allows Hermias to interpret the urban place in different ways in the case of Lysias and Socrates. For the former, it is a place of busy-work.

> It makes sense for someone who is an orator and who seeks phenomenal beauty to spend his time in the city with its thronging crowds. After all, as a professional orator he is involved with [his] material,[9] i.e. public affairs; and as one who pursues appearances, he seeks the approval of the many. So it is not possible for him to live in peace and quiet as long as that's his profession. For, just as peace and quiet become a kind of nourishment, as it were, for the soul that seeks intelligible beauty, so too do the thronging multitude and political plaudits for the one that focuses on appearance.
>
> 20.16–23

For the leisured philosopher like Socrates, however, the city has an entirely different meaning. In his comments on 231d.3–5 Hermias identifies the city with Socrates' continued residence in the intelligible realm:

> The city and the fact that Socrates never leaves the city show that he is always attached to his own origins and causes and to the intelligible gods that are particular to him (*oikeios heautou*); for the true native land of souls is the intelligible cosmos, [and] therefore learning is not [got] from the enmattered and tangible (*antitupos*) (which is what the fields and trees indicate) but from rational and intellective souls and Intellect itself. And the fact that Socrates follows Phaedrus and the book (which is an image of images) show his godlike providential activity in relation to young men and his wish to save them.
>
> 35.1–9

The symbolic ambivalence of the city is thus resolved through each man's characteristic way of engaging with it. Lysias is at work amid the thronging crowds, chasing appearances, so for him the city is a lower place. Socrates is at peace in the leisured activity of philosophy, so for him the city is a higher place.

---

9 'Matter' (*hulê*) here is ambiguous between 'subject-matter' and 'the physical world'.

The countryside is unequivocally a lower place. Socrates enters it, but thanks to the manner in which he engages with it, he does not descend into the Becoming and matter that it symbolises. Hermias finds several signs of this in Plato's text.

First, consider the episode where Phaedrus falsely claims not to be to able to recite the speech of Lysias after having heard it only once. Socrates knows better and at 228a.7 addresses Phaedrus in the third person: 'when listening to Lysias *he* did not hear the speech just once …'. Hermias is confident that this is a sign that Socrates can follow Phaedrus out beyond the walls of the city (i.e. out of the realm of intellect) without ever departing from the noetic city that is his own:

> So the fact that Socrates rejects [Phaedrus'] statement and talks as though addressing someone who isn't present shows that he was not dragged down by visible beauty but entirely belonged to himself and held fast to his own, i.e. intelligible, principles, unscathed by the sensible and the beauty in flesh.
>
> 27.20–23

The impersonal manner in which he addresses Phaedrus thus indicates Socrates' disengagement from the material, erotic world that is symbolised by their private destination in the countryside.

Furthermore, there is the posture that Socrates assumes in relation to each of the speeches.[10] When he is about to hear the speech of Lysias (230c), he reclines on the bank of the river, but with his *head elevated*. Hermias reads this posture—as he does Phaedrus' sitting posture at 227a—in terms of being occupied with lower things. In both cases, the lower thing is the corporeal beauty and licentious love represented by Lysias' speech. But even now, Socrates reclines with his head elevated. This, Hermias tells us, shows that his intellectual part reaches up from matter and generation, even while he:

> listens in a recumbent posture because he is descending from his own intellective activity to the scrutiny of Lysias' words and [so] will be busying himself with more shallow (*koiloteros*)[11] and lowly matters.
>
> 34.30–35.1

10 Scully 89–90 draws attention to the image of Socrates and Phaedrus *sitting down* by the plane tree in order to be *elevated up* through discourse.

11 The literal meaning of *koilos* is 'hollow' and aspects of the context and the fact that it is

Similarly, Socrates' posture is again invoked to distance him from the content of his first speech. This speech he delivers with this head covered. But even if Socrates delivers a speech on a shallow matter, his speech is not in fact at the same level as that of Lysias. It might seem that Socrates' first speech enters into competition with Lysias' speech and attempts to out-do him in arguing that one ought to gratify the non-lover rather than the lover. But of course, Hermias sees things rather differently.

> The characters in Lysias' speech and those here are the same, for Socrates too wants to maintain that one should gratify the non-lover rather than the lover. However, the situation is not the same. Lysias, whose love is licentious, maintained that one should not gratify other lovers whatever their character may be but [only] the non-lover that is, [Lysias] himself, the licentious lover. Socrates, whose love of Phaedrus is of the kind that elevates and saves, will maintain that one ought not to gratify lovers who are licentious and want a lewd (*hubrei*) relationship, but the chaste lover whose love is not licentious. So in the speech there is condemnation of licentious love and commendation and praise of the chaste and decent (*kosmios*) love that disciplines (*katakosmein*) the entire soul and makes the entire life of the man well-ordered, respectable (*semnos*) and decorous.
>
> 53.24–54.3

So, contrary to superficial appearances, Socrates' first speech deals with the beauty in souls.[12] The fitting kind of love for this beauty is self-controlled love (cf. 13.8–9), not the licentious kind that characterises Lysias' speech. Even when Socrates speaks with his head covered, he does not undertake the same journey into materiality that Lysias has completed. Socrates' eros is of an even higher,

---

glossed by *khthamalos* (literally 'near (or on) the ground') suggests some such translation as 'low-lying' (cf. LSJ s. v. I.2) here, but the word is also used metaphorically to mean 'hollow, empty, void of content' (LSJ s. v. II.2) and it surely also has that connotation here and we have settled for 'shallow'.

12 Calvo raises two arguments against the thesis that Socrates' first speech shares the same content as the speech of Lysias with which it seems to compete. First, as Hermias points out (52.1–15), Socrates' speech is inspired by the Muses, suggesting its substance is serious. Second, Socrates' *daimon* does not stop him from delivering it. While Calvo's interpretation of Socrates' speech (a condemnation of the rhetorician as morally deficient through the speech's allegorical association of the rhetorician with the wily lover) differs from Hermias', both avoid the awkward admission that the content of the speech is a 'lie'. Cf. Sinaiko 31.

intellectual kind. So the fact that his head is covered means that he is *operating* (*energein*) at a lower level (cf. 59.9–15)—but this does not mean that he has really *descended* to that level. Socrates is himself and in his proper place when he recites the palinode and Hermias believes that Plato shows us this by the fact that he gives this speech with his head uncovered.

Finally, in the banter at 234d–e, Socrates asks Phaedrus whether he (Socrates) seems to be playing around. This reference to play, Hermias believes, clearly resonates with the sense in which the visible cosmos is a plaything for the gods. Hermias' fellow student, Proclus, invokes this idea of the visible cosmos as the gods' plaything at *in Remp*. I 127.4, ff where he explains the laughter of the gods at *Iliad* 1.599–600. It means that they can exercise providence without engaging in any hard work—though their laughter is a serious matter, in a certain sense, for although it is play for them, they nonetheless bring about the best world possible.

> Socrates is in the same position with regard to the study (*theôria*) of Lysias' speech. He is descending from the intellective contemplation (*theôria*) of himself[13] to undertake the examination of the speech and for that reason he too seems to be at play (*paizein*). But, to the extent that he is saving the young man and putting him back on the right path, he also seems to be in earnest (*spoudazein*).
>
> 43.6–10

Through these signs, Hermias believes that Plato shows us that Socrates goes out from the city (i.e. comes down from the intelligible) and goes out into the countryside (i.e. into the realm of Becoming), but without ever *really* leaving. His leisurely, playful activity means that he is urban even when he is in a rural area.

3 Road Signs along the Way

Having discussed the symbolic significance that Hermias finds in the end points of Socrates' and Phaedrus' journey—the city and the countryside—let us now turn to his exegesis of the details that Plato supplies of their walk.

13 The idea that functioning at a higher level involves turning in upon oneself occurs frequently in Hermias (cf. 20.11; 22.6 ff.; 27.12, etc.). The only other place where this is described as contemplating oneself seems to be at 81.1.

Hermias integrates these road signs into the overall narrative of Socrates quasi-descent to Phaedrus' level and his beneficent elevation of the young man to a better beauty and a better kind of eros.

First there is the mention of the two temples that are near the course of their journey. Phaedrus reports to Socrates that he has been with Lysias at the house of Epicrates 'near the house of Olympian Zeus' (227b.5). Since Lysias' urban location is given a different reading from that of Socrates' habitude, Hermias reads this detail of Plato's dialogue as a reminder that 'even visible beauty is bestowed on generation by Zeus and the Olympian gods' (20.4–5). Their journey takes them in the general direction of another temple: the sanctuary of Artemis the huntress (229c.2).[14] Hermias interprets Artemis' altar in terms of that god's allotment, i.e. her role in the divine providence that governs all things. In this case, she plays a role in Phaedrus' elevation and her name is interpreted in terms of 'the contemplation that hunts out what is universal through particulars and pursues Being through Seeming'.

In the course of their physical journey, Phaedrus and Socrates turn off from the road, walk along the Ilissus, eventually cross the stream, and at midday settle into a nice shaded spot with a plane tree, and a willow that is in full bloom. Each of these episodes is subsumed under the theme of a journey from lower to higher beauty. The river itself is likened to Becoming on the authority of 'the ancients'—presumably this alludes to *Cratylus* 402a–b rather than any detailed and independent reading of Heraclitus. When they go along the Ilissus, Hermias takes this to indicate that they are 'rising above Becoming, and not immersing themselves in it or plumbing its depths' (29.21–24). Of course, they do eventually 'immerse themselves in Becoming' by virtue of crossing the stream—an episode where Phaedrus remarks that he is fortunate in being barefoot on this occasion, while Socrates is always so (229a.3–6). Hermias' reads their absence of footware in the following terms:

> *Unshod* indicates the relaxed attitude and straightforwardness and the readiness for elevation that in Socrates' case were always present and in Phaedrus' case [were present] at that time because he was about to be initiated by Socrates. Moreover summer and midday are suited to elevation according to Heraclitus too, who says,[15] 'gleaming, dry; the wisest soul'.
>
> 29.24–29

14 On the sanctuary of Artemis, see Manolea (2013, 152–153).

15 DK Fr. B 118. This saying is quoted in different forms by different authors. DK list both the longer form we find here (*augê xêrê psuchê*) and also the shorter form 'dry soul, wisest and

Socrates and Phaedrus have chosen the right place to cross. They wet only their feet in the realm of Becoming, indicating that they come in contact with it only by means of the lowest faculties, whilst their rational souls contemplate Becoming from above.[16]

Having crossed the Ilissus, they head toward a comfortable spot under the plane tree seen in the distance. It promises shade, a nice breeze and grass to sit or lie upon (229a.8–b.2). We soon learn that it also contains a 'chaste tree' (*agnos*) that is in full bloom (230b.3).[17] Hermias notes that the vegetation that is named by Plato includes the extremes of the plane tree and the grass—things both high and low. The chaste tree is the intermediate, thus providing indications of the continuous steps for ascent (34.12–19). The breeze, Hermias tells us, stands for the providential inspiration of the gods, while the shade is the intelligible and invisible power that elevates us and takes us up beyond the perceptible (30.9–11).[18]

Along the way to this ideal setting, Socrates and Phaedrus discuss the proper understanding the myth of Oreithyia (229b.4–30a.6). Hermias connects the features of their destination with the discussion of Oreithyia through the person of Erechtheus, who is sometimes said to be the father of Oreithyia (31.2–4). He presides over the three realms just alluded to: that of water (which they've just crossed), air (the breeze) and earth (the soft grass to rest upon). The physical setting in which Socrates and Phaedrus will hold their conversation, then, is described in ways that pre-figure the ascent through the various kinds of beauty that is the psychic narrative of the dialogue.

Hermias also offers an interpretation of the role of the conversation about Oreithyia within the movement of the dialogue. Socrates is, in fact, filling time until they can arrive at this spot that is so symbolically primed for Phaedrus' elevation.

> The poets devised choruses to fill up gaps [in the action] and, since it has introduced Socrates in the process of leading Phaedrus to the threshold of initiation, the narrative at this point does not want to divert his

---

best' (*auê psyche*). The text has the longer form, though Couvreur amended to the shorter one. It is hard to see his motivation for the connection with the midday summer setting makes the word *augê* relevant.

16 For the significance of Socrates and Phaedrus' state of being barefoot in Hermias cf. Manolea (2013, 151–152).

17 Hermias does not comment on the symbolic associations of the *agnos* and its role in celebrations of chastity; cf. Daumas.

18 For the breeze cf. Manolea (2013, 152).

> [sc. Phaedrus'] attention to anything else until they have reached the place [of initiation] (for once he has been initiated, it [sc. the narrative] wants to keep him there), for which reason he [sc. Phaedrus] meanwhile becomes inquisitive and desires to learn some philosophical doctrine (*theôria*) appropriate to the present [dramatic] situation (*hupothesis*). For[19] 'Orithyia' would be a soul desiring the things on high (*ta anô*)—[the name is] from *orouô* ('rush towards') and *thuô* ('desire eagerly') with Attic vowel-lengthening.[20,21]
>
> 31.15–22

This dramatic interlude delays the launch of Phaedrus' psychic journey until they are in the shade of the plane tree, with the willow 'in full bloom' (*akmên echei tês anthês*, 230b.4–5). For Hermias, this must resonate with the *Chaldean Oracles*' 'flower of intellect' for he announces at this point that Phaedrus is ready for *anagôgê*. Their point of departure is a place sacred to nymphs and to Achelous (230b.7–8) and Hermias interprets the nymphs as assistants of Dionysus. They are near water, meaning that they have entered the realm of generation (34.20–24), and they are ready to assist Phaedrus in his rebirth.

4 The Road not Taken

In addition to the journey that Socrates and Phaedrus actually take to the banks of the Ilissus, there is the trip that Socrates is *prevented* from making. Having given his first speech in reply to that of Lysias, Socrates announces his intention to leave at 242a.1. His *daimôn* intervenes, however, prompting the

19 'For' because what follows explains how the myth (suitably interpreted) parallels Phaedrus' present situation.

20 The suggestion here seems to be that *thuia*, the final syllable of *Ôreithuia*, derives from the same root as the verb *thuô*, the vowel *u* having been lengthened to *ui*. Hermeias, or his source, may have had in mind the phenomenon known as compensatory lengthening, whereby a short vowel is lengthened to make up for a dropped consonant. Although the phenomenon is not specifically Attic, it's hard to see how it could apply here, and a short *u* would become a long one rather than *ui*. (As it happens, *thuô* actually appears in the alternative form *thuiô* in post-Homeric epic, although Hermias presumably did not know that.) Cf. the alternative etymology of *Ôreithuia* in line 7.

21 For all versions of the Oreithyia myth as treated in the Hermias commentary and their significance see Manolea (2013, 159–161).

production of his second speech, which is a palinode to atone for his sins against Eros in the first speech.

Hermias interprets this episode in terms of Socrates' descent from his usual noetic level downward to come to the aid of Phaedrus. It marks the lowest that Socrates will go to help the young man, and the palinode symbolises his re-ascent to his proper place. He believes that the details of Plato's text make this clear.

At 241d.2 Socrates brings his speech to an abrupt end. He explains to Phaedrus that he has gone beyond his earlier speaking in dithyrambs (238d.1) to speaking in hexameters, and fears that if he proceeds he will be possessed by the nymphs. Given the general praise for divine possession, Hermias poses the question why Socrates declines to be Nymph-possessed. The answer takes us back to the geography of their earlier journey. The nymphs are concerned with the realm of generation. In his account of Socrates' comments on being 'Nymph-possessed', delivered in the midst of his first speech, Hermias explains:

> So since the present life of Socrates is purificatory and elevating (for he wants to save the young man and remove him from [the spell of] the beauty in [the realm of] generation, or external beauty), and since the Nymphs and Dionysus are overseers of generation, on that account he declares that he is inspired by the Nymphs, or *nymph-possessed* (*numpholêptos*), and *not far from speaking in dithyrambs*, as if he had offered up (*anateinein*) his life to the gods that oversee creation and was receiving inspiration from that source and getting succour and assistance from them.
>
> 58.26–34

But the end of the speech marks the limit of Socrates' involvement with the gods who oversee generation. Hermias thinks that he declines to go the full distance with the nymphs:

> Hence, back there [sc. earlier in the speech], because of his dithyrambic delivery, he realised that he would begin to be possessed 'in the course of his speech' (hence he has called it a 'divinely inspired fervour', not just 'divinely-inspired' or just 'fervour', but the combination 'divinely inspired fervour'). Here, on the other hand, he realises that he *is* possessed, since 'I am now reciting [hexameter] verses and no longer dithyrambs'. [Hexameter] verses, and their straightforward and measured delivery, are appropriate to divine possession, just as irregular and disorderly delivery is to dithyrambs. So Socrates wants to stop, taking the fact that it has suddenly

> come upon him (*eperkhesthai*) to speak in metrical (*emmetros*) verses as a sign that his speech has reached its limit (*metron*).
>
> 66.5–15

His withdrawal at this point is likened to the way in which the Demiurge withdraws, leaving the younger gods to do the detailed work (*Tim.* 42e.5), or the manner in which the god withdraws in the *Statesman* (272e.5). When he announces his intention to leave and cross the river, Hermias interprets this as if he had said:

> mounting above generation and rising superior to it I shall return to my intellective watching-place before I am compelled by my long dwelling on externals to descend from [the level of] my intellect to discursive arguments (*logismos*) and the generated world (*to genêton*).
>
> 69.10–13

He is urged by Phaedrus not to go until the heat passes. Hermias interprets this comment to mean 'until I have put aside everything earthly and enmattered and all of the discharge [in the eye] of my soul and become pure and more immaterial' (69.13–15). Fortunately for Phaedrus, Socrates' *daimon* prompts him to revisit Socrates' earlier assessment of the young man's ability to follow him upward beyond the level of the beauty of the soul and the corresponding self-controlled form of love. At the urging of his *daimon*, Socrates now addresses the boy as 'divine' (242a7) and relates to him the palinode through which Socrates makes his *anodos* back to the noetic realm that is his native land (78.5).

This episode, in which Socrates' departure is pre-empted by the intervention of his *daimon*, is the last "action" in the dialogue. Socrates and Phaedrus do not go anywhere or do anything except talk until the very last line of the dialogue, where Socrates says, 'Let's go.' Hermias comments on the next to last line, but not this one. So we have no further physical journeys for him to interpret symbolically. Let us take stock then, and consider the significance of Hermias' reading of the journey to the Ilissus.

5 Reading Plato and the Journey Back to God

Contemporary philosophers have struggled to know what to make of the tradition of Neoplatonic commentary on the works of Plato and Aristotle. If we think of them as contributions to the understanding of the texts that they

ostensibly comment upon, we may weigh them very lightly indeed. The allegorising of Socrates' and Phaedrus' journey to the banks of the river can only seem plausible if one already accepts fundamental concepts of Neoplatonic thought, such as procession, remaining and reversion, and these concepts seem to most of us to be an alien imposition upon the works of Plato and Aristotle.

The beginning of wisdom in this matter is to recognise that, first, the commentaries that we possess are more or less direct results of a *teaching context*. This is very clear in the case of Hermias' commentary and the question of the relation between his text and the lectures of Syrianus is one that has generated much speculation. The second thing to realise is that this teaching context aimed at the *psychic transformation* of the participants. They did not listen to Syrianus (or Hermias) merely to know the content of Plato's dialogues. Rather, Hermias' fellow student, Proclus, characterised the correct grasp of Plato's thought as a kind of *mystagogy* and their teacher, Syrianus, as a *hierophant* (*Plat. Theol.* I §1 5.16–6.7). We know with some degree of specificity the kind of psychic transformation at which this mystical initiation through the reading of Plato aimed: likeness to god achieved through the acquistion of progressively more abstract gradations of the cardinal virtues.[22]

This contextualisation of the commentaries only takes us so far, however. It is clear enough *that* the community of teachers and students aimed at the acquisition of these virtues and thus at assimilation to the divine through the shared activity of reading and interpreting Plato. But exactly *how* this activity was meant to accomplish this end, or indeed exactly what the possession of these virtues was thought to consist in, remains a mystery. In response to this mystery, we must form and test hypotheses. My current hypothesis is that the gradations of the cardinal virtues are best conceived of as the possession and exercise of what we may call 'Platonic literacy'. Platonic literacy resembles in certain ways the capacities of the educated gentlemen or *pepaideumenos* of the late antiquity.[23]

The expensive and time-consuming education in grammar, rhetoric and the ready recall of passages from canonical works of Homer, Plato, Demosthenes, etc that comprised late antique *paideia* was also characterised in terms of an

22 Cf. Baltzly (2017) for the goal of living as likeness to the divine and the place of the reading order of the Platonic dialogues in the acquisition of the virtues through which this goal was thought to be achieved.

23 For an overview of the content, acquisition and functions of late antique *paideia*, see Watt (2012).

initiation into mystery cults. The *pepaideumenos* was also characterised as 'a friend of the Muses'. His (or more rarely, her) learning was performed for an audience of similarly learned *cognoscenti* and through this performance he sought, *inter alia*, to lay claim to status that warranted a certain kind of treatment.[24] The performance of this learning involved an importantly improvisational aspect. The learned person could find the appropriate clever allusion for the specific circumstance, thus demonstrating his class membership and making a claim upon *pepaideumenoi* for the treatment appropriate to a gentleman.

> Confronting the legal advisers of a newly arrived governor (who may have grown up in Rome), Libanius posed the crucial question: "How did Odysseus rule when king of Ithaca?" "Gently as a father" [cf. *Od.* 2.233] was the instant reply. The classical phrase set the tone for the relations between the governor and town council in the months that followed.
>
> BROWN 40

By contrast the Platonic literacy that our philosophers aimed to instill was not performed for an external audience, but was rather performed internally. I have argued elsewhere that the goal of reading each of these dialogues under the guidance of a master should be understood as a kind of 'perlocutionary hermeneutics'.[25] The student comes to live 'in and through' the dialogues in such a way that he casts off concepts derived from the misleading guidance of sensation, adopts new metaphors to live by, and is generally able to 'read' all things in light of content of his Platonic education.

The commentary tradition is filled with examples where the exegesis of the Platonic text invites the learners to see one thing as another. Consider an example from Proclus' exegesis of *Timaeus* 21b.1–7. There the teacher invites the young Platonist to see a new cosmic significance in events that would undoubtedly be familiar to him:

> The **competitions for recitation** are analogous to the challenges that souls confront as they weave their own lives together with the universe. This recitation resembles the interlinked and interwoven life of the universe, for ⟨the latter⟩ involves the imitation of the intellective forms, just

24 On the role of claims to inclusion in the class of the learned in limiting arbitrary exercises of power in the late Roman Empire, see Brown.

25 Baltzly (2014).

> as the former involves the imitation of heroic actions and characters along with the preservation of this connecting thread.
>
> *in Tim.* I 89.17–22, TARRANT

The young men who are hearing Proclus' lectures would almost certainly have participated in such contests in the context of their training in rhetoric. Similarly at I 123.24, ff. the student can have a new perspective on the act of memorising important texts—another common part of a young man's education. Commenting on *Timaeus* 23a.1–5 Proclus likens the world to a temple. The 'recording of ancient deeds' (such as the Egyptians do in the story of Atlantis) is analogous to the formal principles that conserve the universe. So one psychagogic effect of absorbing Proclus' commentary is to enable the student to read many everyday events in the student life as images of important elements of the *Timaeus' physiologia*.

In contrast to the *Timaeus*, the *skopos* of the *Phaedrus* is 'beauty at every level' (Iamblichus, *in Phdr.* fr. 1 = Hermias, *in Phdr.* 10.7–8). Rather than being a capstone dialogue, its place in the sequence of dialogues correlates with the theoretical virtues—specifically in the contemplation of the gods. These virtues are manifested in the activity of the soul in relation to the content of intellect (cf. Porphyry, *Sent.* 27.2–28.5). In this respect it is paired with the *Symposium*. This is perhaps no surprise, since both deal with a god—Eros—that plays a signficant role in returning the soul to the divine intelligibles. Further, both are dialogues that contain episodes in which the vision or *theôria* of the divine intelligibles is described. The dialogues are also alike in being among Plato's most dramatically complex works and in involving physical journeys on the part of the characters. First, there is the journey from Phaleron to the city that is undertaken by Apollodorus and Glaucon—a journey that he describes as a prologue to his subsequent narration of the events of the dinner party to his now unnamed companions. Then there are the various journeys that take place within the story that Aristodemus has given to Apollodorus to re-tell: their journey to the house of Agathon, interrupted by Socrates' pause on the porch; the journey that the speaking role makes around the carefully described circle of diners; the ascent up the various steps in the ladder of love in Diotima's account; and finally the entrance of Alcibiades with his speech that narrates his travels with Socrates and the fateful dinner that shamed Alcibiades. If we assume that the commentaries on both dialogues were parallel, then we can well imagine the ingenious correlations that the Neoplatonic commentators might have drawn between the physical journeys of the characters within the dialogue and the ascent of the soul to the gods through Eros.

Travel was an important part of the experience of studying philosophy. First, as Watts has pointed out, this was particularly true of aspiring Platonists coming to Athens during the time when Plutarch, Syrianus and Proclus were leading the school.[26] Second, the *bioi* of the Neoplatonists that we have from various authors reveal an attraction for 'sacred tourism'. For instance, we can think of the trip that Iamblichus undertook to the baths of Gadara, where he was seen to summon two spirits (Eunapius, *Vit. Soph.* 5.2.2, ff). Proclus similarly utilised his forced vacation from Athens to acquaint himself with the ancient rites practised in Lydia (Marinus, *Vit.* §15). Finally, the content of Damascius' *Paradoxa* suggests travellers' tales.

Hermias' interpretation of the journeys of Plato's *Phaedrus* equips his students with new ways of seeing this common feature of a young philosopher's life. Every physical journey they now take can be read, and thus lived, through the many-leveled journey Hermias has unveiled for them in the *Phaedrus*. River-crossings, the sounds of cicadas, an oath upon a particular god—all these everyday occurrences can now be lived through the text of the divine Plato. Hermias' symbolic reading of the details of the journey in the *Phaedrus* may seem to us a bit strained. But we are not attempting to engender a psychic transformation in ourselves or in our students that would allow us to experience everyday events by seeing them in terms drawn from Plato's dialogues. What seems hermeneutically willful (at least to some of us) may be psychagogically fruitful for the aspiring Neoplatonist.

26 Watts (2004).