Philosophical Incantations (*Itihāsa* and *Epode*). The Power of Narrative Reason in the *Mahābhārata*

Raquel Ferrández Formoso
Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy,
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), Spain
rferrandez@fsof.uned.es

Abstract:

This essay discusses a possible parallel between the way certain *itihāsa*-s are used in the twelfth book of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Book of Peace* (*śāntiparvan*), and the philosophical incantation or "epode" presented by certain Platonic dialogues. Both the *itihāsa*-s of the *Mahābhārata* and the Platonic philosophical "epode" are often used to persuade in conditions where emotion threatens to incapacitate the person for argumentative discourse. Narrative reason has its own conditions of success and failure, opening up a discursive arena in which all kinds of utterances and even argumentative discourse itself are welcome. Emphasizing the psychagogic function of the "once-upon-a-time" reason, it is worth asking who the real protagonist of the story is and whether the story has a duty or a *dharma* of its own to fulfill. *Dharma* and all the dilemmas it brings along with it constitute one of the fundamental problems that make up the whole *Mahābhārata.* However, in this essay I wonder about the *dharma* of the *Mahābhārata* itself—a literary work which gives itself the name "triumph" (*jaya*)—and the cultural mission it fulfills in the lives of those who hear it, read it, study it, and share it with others.

Keywords: persuasion, *dharma*, Plato, imagination, myth, allegory

1. Are stories living beings?

The songs of men/ are more beautiful than themselves
Heavier with hope/ sadder/ more durable
More than men/ I have loved their songs
I could live without men/ never without the songs.

Nazim Hikmet ("The Songs of Men", 1960)

What does it mean to save a song? The expression "to save a myth" can be found in some Platonic dialogues. For example, in the myth of Er that Socrates tells at the end of the *Republic* (621b). Er was able to travel to the underworld and return to the world of the living to warn us not to drink too much from the river of Forgetfulness. Socrates concludes then that the myth was saved by Er and, in return, now the myth can save us. This could be a play on words that has its basis in philology, for the verb "to save" in ancient Greek can imply "to remember" when used in the middle voice (Morgan, 2000). The myth was saved because it was remembered and can now save us, spiritually, if we allow it to transform us. Furthermore, "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 [of Er]" (Morgan, 2000, p.283). The *phalaśruti* or traditional verses that we find at the end of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* and so many other works of Indian philosophy and literature, point in the same direction. They promise us all the good we will receive just

by hearing the story, or even a stanza of the story, how much we will benefit by never forgetting it. In short, they promise us that if we save the story, the story will save us.

It is important to emphasize that putting a story in writing does not guarantee its salvation. Writing preserves information, but it does not necessarily save a story, or rather, it does not necessarily save the salvific power of a story. Not even its oral transmission through the generations can guarantee such salvation. There are conditions that must be met, on the part of the listener and on the part of the storyteller as well. In his essay *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin (2006) mentions certain conditions necessary for a story to be saved. One of them indicates that the more the listeners forget themselves, the more deeply the story heard is imprinted on them.

My aim in this essay is twofold. First, I propose to discuss a possible parallel between the mode of using certain *itihāsa*-s in the *Mahābhārata* and the philosophical incantation or "epode" that takes place in some Platonic dialogues. To this end I will focus primarily on the twelfth book of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Book of Peace* (*śāntiparvan*), which opens with what James L. Fitzgerald (2004a) has called "the persuasion of Yudhiṣṭhira". I take the word "itihāsa" in its broad sense of legendary or mythical tale, and "epode" in the sense of "magical charm" as used in dialogues such as the *Phaedo*. For example, in a famous passage in this dialogue, Cebes asks Socrates to persuade his inner child not to fear death, to which Socrates replies that it is necessary to sing charms (*epadein*, Phd.77e) daily to that fearful child. The philosopher is a conjurer, *epodos*, first of all, of her/himself.

Secondly, I will discuss the conditions of success and failure of these "philosophical incantations" that are primarily articulated through myths and stories. For these stories have a role to play beyond themselves and outside of the tradition that gives them authority; a mission that will be played out within each new individual who receives

them. Their criteria of truth become the criteria of the transformation they achieve or fail to achieve in the listener. Given its *psychagogic* function, that is, its purpose of guiding the listener's soul in a certain direction, the listener becomes the main character of the story, and thus, narrative reason needs each new listener to validate it to fulfill its purpose. When Simon Brodbeck (2021) states that the main characters of the *Mahābhārata* are not the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, but the listener of the story, King Janamejaya, he is returning the weight of the story to this very psychagogic function. This seems to me a wise move in many ways even though this unique function arises new questions about narrative reason, its purpose and its conditions. For example, if we admit that the whole *Mahābhārata* has as its mission to pacify King Janamejaya, what would happen if, after having heard this story told by Vaiśaṃpāyana, this king had resumed the sacrifice of the snakes in an even more violent way? In this case, the psychagogic function of the story would not have been fulfilled. Furthermore, this psychagogic function that every story and myth possess can be considered the *dharma* of the story, in the sense of its duty and in the sense of its very existence. Of course, *dharma* is related to culture, and, more specifically, to the human world. *Dharma* is not as such a property of nature, nor of inert things[1]. But stories belong to the realm of culture and must be told, retold, heard and remembered by human beings who bring them to life and save them through the generations – an *itihāsa* is not an inanimate product of human beings, nor is it even a "product" in the sense of being once and for all finished, just as it is not a natural phenomenon but a living being whose life depends on the cultural effort of each person who gives it voice, heart and ear. Therefore, I propose that it is the *dharma* of each *itihāsa* that is at stake each time a new listener saves or spoils it. In the *Book of Peace*, Yudhiṣṭhira spoils some of the ancient *itihāsa*-s with which his younger brother Arjuna tries to persuade him, while saving many others told by Kṛṣṇa, Nārada or Vyāsa. Callicles, with

his staunch skepticism, spoils the myth of the Judgment of Souls with which Socrates seeks to persuade him, but this myth could be saved in the hearing of other listeners. Thus, the fulfillment of each *itihāsa*'s *dharma* does not depend on itself but it is at the mercy of the *dharma* of the one who hears and receives it. There must be an "attunement of *dharmas*" between the story itself, – through the storyteller who brings it to life – and the listener.

As is well known, *dharma* and all the dilemmas it brings with it constitute one of the fundamental problems that make up the whole *Mahābhārata*. Although *dharma* as such is subtle and hidden, and the Sanskrit word is difficult to translate into English, it is necessary to ask about the *dharma* of the *itihāsa* itself. Does the *Mahābhārata*, which gives itself the name "triumph" (*jayo nāmetihāso 'yaṃ*; MBh, 18.39), have a *dharma* of its own to fulfill in the lives of those who listen to it, read it, study it, and share it with others? If that is the case, it is up to us to save or spoil its *dharmic* mission. In this decision, two very different ways of relating to literature, imagination and life itself, come into play, since saving a story—or letting it go to waste—compromises our own *dharma* in the first place.

2. Cooling, pacifying, persuading: *itihāsa* and *epode*

In the beginning of the twelfth book of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Book of Peace* (*śāntiparvan*), Yudhiṣṭhira, "the son of Dharma," is tempted to abandon the *dharma* due to him as king to become a renouncing ascetic, and to surrender even to death by fasting. Words of depression and deep sadness characterize his state of mind (*viṣāda*, *dainya*, *śoka*...). After certain episodes of grief and loss that every war entails, Yudhiṣṭhira has lost the meaning of life and thus his role in it. What follows this moment in the plot is what James L. Fitzgerald (2004a) called the "persuasion of Yudhiṣṭhira." This collective

persuasion, orchestrated by his family, sages, and counselors, undergoes several phases and adopts various methods. First, for 13 chapters (12.7-19), Yudhiṣṭhira's family will try to make him see reason through arguments that carry a significant emotional charge. His four brothers (Arjuna, Bhīma, Nakula and Sahadeva) and the wife the five shares (Draupadī) have suffered just as much as he has the vicissitudes that have led them to this war. Yudhiṣṭhira's unexpected decision to become a renunciant causes a major family crisis. The first move is to make him see reason through all sorts of arguments about his due duty and the hardships they have all endured to arrive at victory. His brother Bhīma accuses him of undermining everyone by his confusion, "How can the king of the world, who is conversant with all the learned treatises (*sarva-śāstra-viśāradaḥ*), become muddled with depression (*moham āpadyate dainyād*), as if he were some dull clod (*kupuruṣa*)?" (MBh, 16.4-7)[2]. Indeed, Yudhiṣṭhira has read the treatises explaining the cycle of rebirths and should already know that beings are born and die; should also be aware of the ephemeral law of life governed by time (*kāla*), the root of all things, of which Yudhiṣṭhira and all of us are but an instrument[3]. We suppose that, moreover, he should already know that his eternal and indelible identity, his *ātman*, can neither kill nor die.

However, the experience of his own life narrative seems to be stronger than educational narratives about duty, religion, and philosophy. The voice of his narrative self, fragile, hurting and insecure, is more powerful than the voice of the *ātman* or the voice of *dharma*. "Great king, since it has come to this, I will make an argument to get you to rule," his brother Bhīma sentences at this point. But will it be an explanation about what is reasonable that convinces Yudhiṣṭhira to abandon his ascetic aspiration and crown himself king? "Now a terrible battle (*yuddham*) with your mind alone (*manasaikena*) awaits you," Bhīma sentences, "a battle in which there is no need of arrows, nor allies, nor kinsmen; a battle you must fight by yourself (*ātmanaikena*): that is the battle that

awaits you. And if you lose your life before the battle is won, you will arrive at another body and you will fight with it again" (MBh, 12.16.20-24). Yudhiṣṭhira has won in the battle of Kurukṣetra, but now he must convince himself of that victory – and the nature of that war is different, as Bhīma appreciates. However, it is not quite true that in such an inner battle Yudhiṣṭhira is completely alone; that he has no need of allies, no need of relatives. In fact, this is said in chapter 16, but he will not agree to be crowned until chapter 39, an interlude in which both his family and his teachers try to persuade him to change his mind, or, what amounts to the same thing, they try to pacify him so that he will stop making decisions driven by grief. The discourse adopted by his teachers to that end is somewhat different from that adopted by his brothers and Draupadī. As if understanding the mood that possesses him, the sages (Kṛṣṇa, Vyāsa, Nārada...) attenuate the weight of the arguments by wrapping them superbly in *itihāsa*-reasoning, the "once-upon-a-time" reason, through the narration of legendary stories by which they seek to conjure and move Yudhiṣṭhira's affliction (*śoka*). Thus, for more than twenty chapters a kind of collective "incantation" takes place in a persuasive process very similar to what in certain Platonic dialogues is known as "epode" (magical spell). And one would say that it is these stories of ancient kings plunged into despair and destined to face ethical dilemmas similar to those of Yudhiṣṭhira, or the stories of mythical wars between gods and demons, that end up arousing his curiosity and pacifying his mood so that he finally agrees to change his mind and becomes convinced enough to agree to be triumphantly crowned king in Hāstinapura.

Previously, Arjuna had tried on several occasions to conjure Yudhiṣṭhira's grief by means of *itihāsa*-s. But Arjuna is his younger brother, and what he receives in return are words of condescension from his elder brother[4]. The *itihāsa*-s that really end up arousing Yudhiṣṭhira's curiosity are those related by older people-sages, teachers, and

counselors whom he admires. This is a common and practically universal feature of myths, which not only owe their authority to tradition, but are usually narrated by persons older – and, one supposes, wiser – than their hearers[5]. When what is sought is to appease and conjure away an emotion that threatens to overwhelm reason, the *itihāsa*-reason has among its conditions that the conjured consider the conjurer worthy of being heard, either because of his moral or spiritual superiority –which is usually also associated with a superiority in terms of age and life experience[6].

Fitzgerald (2004a) goes on to interpret Bhīṣma's long teaching to Yudhiṣṭhira (MBh, 12.45-13.252) in terms of cooling and pacification, as a ritual of *śānti* proper to the Vedic liturgy, now applied to the overheating or suffering (*śoka*) of Yudhiṣṭhira. From this interpretation it can be understood that this twelfth book, the *Book of Peace*, is not only so called because the Kurukṣetra war has already taken place, but because this whole book is about the pacification of Yudhiṣṭhira. It does not seem trivial at this point to notice that, if Yudhiṣṭhira becomes *śānta* or "pacified", it is thanks to *itihāsa*-reason; it is often said that the long sermon of Bhīṣma, from the *Rājadharmaparvan* to the *Anuśāsanaparvan,* contains the most "philosophical" parts of the *Mahābhārata*, but it is not sufficiently appreciated that this philosophy is given under a long string of *itihāsa*-s which serve a *psychagogic* function and operate in the manner of an incantation or enchantment. Often this incantation operates by means of a play of mirrors: take as an example the story of the birth of the goddess of death, Mṛtyu. It is no accident that this story already present in the seventh book[7], is now repeated again in the context of Bhīṣma's teaching in the twelfth book. For, it seems natural to tell to a king who is reluctant to rule, the myth of a goddess of Death who is reluctant to kill. Yudhiṣṭhira has everything in this myth to see himself identified. Like Yudhiṣṭhira, the goddess Mṛtyu too refused to fulfill her *dharma*: faced with the command to kill, her first reaction was

weeping, and, like Yudhiṣṭhira, she too wanted to become an ascetic to try to change the course of events. Eventually, the goddess will be betrayed by her own grief, as Prajāpati transforms her tears into the diseases that will end the lives of the creatures. But Mṛtyu's constant fear in this story is to incur in *adharma* and she does not come to her senses no matter how much Prajāpati assures her that her task is altogether righteous and *dharmic*. Neither a king nor a goddess of Death is born to embrace the *nivṛtti-mārga*. Both are overheated by a suffering (*śoka*) that renders them unable to act, so both are to be cooled/pacified until they understand that fulfilling their role is just, necessary, and inevitable[8]. Prajāpati does not employ *itihāsa*-s to pacify the goddess Mṛtyu, but had he done so, the specular reflection would have been almost perfect, for this is what Bhīṣma is doing to make Yudhiṣṭhira understand that death is just and necessary.

The recourse to *itihāsa*-reason to conjure emotional states and deep concerns in the face of existential dramas (death, the passage of time, etc.) can be associated with recourse to *epode* as found in Platonic dialogues such as the *Phaedo*. In this dialogue, Cebes asks Socrates to persuade his inner child not to fear death, to which the master replies that it is necessary to sing charms (*epadein*, Phd., 77e) daily to this fearful child who dwells within us; the philosopher is a conjurer, an *epodos*, not only of others, but, first and foremost, of her/himself. On the day of his death, Socrates himself clings to the idea of the immortality of the soul and conjures himself (and his audience) by recounting the myth of the Soul's Journey to the Other World[9]. Elizabeth Belfiore (1983) claims that in the Platonic dialogues we can find a kind of "philosophical *epode*" that is applied as a counter-spell to the "deceptive magic" of the sophists, whose speeches appeal to the emotion of the listener. As opposed to *elenchus*, the philosophical *epode* is applied in contexts where emotion threatens to be stronger than reason and, in this sense, its spell also has a pacifying effect, articulated in the form of myths.

When they are associated with magic, the *elenchus*, a catharsis of the reason, is usually seen as directed against magic's aim of driving out true opinion, while the philosophical *epode* is most often conceived as blocking the means by which magic works: the use of the emotions to overcome reason. In many passages, whether the vocabulary of magic is used or not, the *epode* differs radically from the *elenchus*, for it has an emotional appeal, as explicitly opposed to a rational appeal. For example, at *Laws* 903a10-b2 a distinction is made between the arguments (*logoi*) that attempt to convince the atheist and the epode he will need in addition. In contrast to the *elenchus* which is dangerous for young people (*Republic* 538d-539d), the *epode* is useful in the training of children who cannot yet reason. (Belfiore, 1983, p. 134)

This does not imply that *itihāsa*-reason is a childish matter, nor that the *epode* should be applied only to children. Socrates himself employs it on the day of his death, however much he warns that it would be unwise to believe that account detail by detail (*Phaedo*, 114d). Faced with a skeptic of stories and myths like Callicles, Socrates himself goes so far as to say that the myth of the Judgment of Souls is no myth at all, but a true account (*logos*) of which Socrates is convinced (*Gorgias*, 526d). But how does this myth differ from the myth of Er in the *Republic*? Why is the former *logos* and the latter not? If in the *Republic* (114b) Plato characterizes the myth as a "noble lie," in the *Gorgias*, Socrates may be lying nobly in duplicate. Some scholars have resolved that the insistence on the veracity of the myth of the Judgment of Souls is proportional to the skepticism of the interlocutor whom Socrates wants to convince[10]. Edmonds (2012) has shown that the myth of this post-mortem trial follows the design of the Socratic *elenchus* and is opposed to the kind of trials that were then taking place in the courts of Athens - the kind of trial for which Socrates had been condemned to death. However, that manifestation of the *elenchus* is given at the end of the dialogue in the form of an *itihāsa* and its intention is no less to persuade Callicles that being just is useful even after death. This is a further sign that *itihāsa*-reason can bring other forms of reason to life, giving them another

avenue of expression where reason based on questions, premises, objections and conclusions, fails to persuade. But in the Platonic myths we hardly find dialogues between their characters; the gods or daimons who appear in them do not engage in intellectual debates, nor do we see them developing within the mythological plot. In fact, many myths lack characters and consist only of the description of the ultramundane geographies through which the soul traverses. On the contrary, the *itihāsa*-s with which Bhīṣma pacifies Yudhiṣṭhira become the setting for dialogues where metaphysical, cosmological, ethical and even rhetorical discussions unfold. Belonging to the corpus of oral literature, these stories usually come referred to by a speaker who claims to have heard or witnessed them himself, even though the *itihāsa* remains, like the Platonic myth, always unverifiable[11]. Either its facts often refer to the past – as does the *Mahābhārata* itself, the story of the exploits of the ancestors of King Janamejaya, narrated by Vaiśaṃpāyana, who has heard them told by the mouth of a witness like Vyāsa – or they are inaccessible because they are rooted in a markedly mythological setting and deal with gods, demons, and fantastic creatures.

As Luc Brisson points out, in the Platonic dialogues there is a clear opposition between narrative discourse, which corresponds to myth, and argumentative discourse.

> For Plato, myths have two defects. It is an unverifiable discourse that can often be assimilated to a false one. And it is a narrative whose elements are contingently linked, in contrast to an argumentative discourse whose internal organization manifests necessity. (Brisson, 2004, p. 26).

The conditions of a verifiable discourse are analytically discussed, albeit in a cursory way, in a dialogue on rhetoric such as *The Sophist*. Bhīṣma also teaches Yudhiṣṭhira the basic conditions of correct, ethical, and meaningful discourse, but he does

so through an *itihāsa*, in which an ascetic named Sulabhā instructs king Janaka on proper rhetoric (MBh, 12.308). This allows us to establish a basic difference with respect to the use of *itihāsa*-s in Plato and the *Mahābhārata*: in the Platonic dialogues, myth does not serve to educate, but to persuade the interlocutor to harbor a belief or to modify his behavior[12]. Rather, education (*paideia*) is associated with the *elenchus* and thus with argumentative discourse (*Sophist*, 229b). This may be related, among other factors, with the Platonic idea that our intellect is limited, so that sometimes myth is the best way to reflect a truth to which we cannot have direct access[13]. In contrast, Yudhiṣṭhira is instructed by Bhīṣma through *itihāsa*-s for the most part, within which argumentative discourses unfold around rhetoric, metaphysics, ethics or the use of reason, as is the case in the story of Sulabhā or the story of the brahman Kāśyapa whom the god Indra prevents from thinking without any purpose beyond thinking itself (MBh, 12. 181). Thus, the territory of the fantastic does not exclude argumentative discourse, but rather serves as a stage for it, and does not seem to be motivated simply by an epistemological limitation of Yudhiṣṭhira, as if the *itihāsa* were a compelling way to palliate an intellective incapacity or a mere tool to supplement what cannot be argued in any other way. The story of Sulabhā, like many others in the *Mahābhārata*, confirm Lyotard's thought when he claimed that "unlike the developed forms of the discourse of knowledge, [the narrative form] admits a plurality of language games" (1984, p.20). All kinds of utterances fit into these *itihāsa*-s, from denotation with respect to the world, to deontology about how one should behave towards others and one's environment according to one's role in society, to interrogative utterances that carry a challenge (think of the interrogation of the god Dharma disguised as a *yakṣa* to Yudhiṣṭhira, at the end of his exile in the forest [MBh, 3.297]), etc. The three competencies that, according to Lyotard (1984, p. 21), are at stake in every story, namely: "know-how", "knowing-how-to-speak", and "knowing-how-to-

hear", are intertwined and tested in each of these stories of the *Mahābhārata*. Furthermore, they are being told to operate a very clear transformation in the one who receives the story, to the point that it is necessary to wonder whether their protagonist might not be the listener herself.

3. The *dharma* of an *itihāsa*

Ugraśravas is telling the story of the *Mahābhārata* to a group of priests as he has heard it told by Vaiśaṃpāyana when he related it to Arjuna's great-grandson, King Janamejaya. Vaiśaṃpāyana, in turn, knows the story because it was related to him by his guru, Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, the grandfather of the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas. Following Lyotard in his explanation of the pragmatics of transmission of narrative forms, the three figures of narrator, narratee, and referent are intertwined in this meta-narrative play. One becomes an authorized narrator by the simple fact of having heard the story, that is, of having once been its narratee. For example, we will say that Ugraśravas becomes an authorized narrator just by virtue of having heard the story through the mouth of Vaiśaṃpāyana. The same is true of the latter, an authorized narrator by virtue of having been Vyāsa's narratee. Vyāsa himself, on the other hand, is both narrator (Vaiśaṃpāyana tells us what Vyāsa would have told him), as well as referent, since he plays a fundamental role in the events of the story, and, not least, narratee, since he hears his own story told through the mouth of Vaiśaṃpāyana[14]. But of all the narratees present in the story, it is King Janamejaya who stands out, the "Pāṇḍava's story first royal listener," as Simon Brodbeck (2021a, p. 82) points out.

Brodbeck argues that the *Mahābhārata* is primarily the story of this king, and not of the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, since it is being told to transform and pacify him, first

and foremost. When this story is told to him, King Janamejaya finds himself at the interruption of the "sacrifice of snakes" that he himself had organized in an attempt to avenge his father, killed by the bite of the snake Takṣaka. At the beginning of the first book of the *Mahābhārata* we are informed of all this meta-narrative play, so that, according to Brodbeck (2021a, p. 81), "Janamejaya the listener has been set up as the main character by MBh 1.3." And although the sacrifice of the snakes had been interrupted by the king before this story was told to him, Brodbeck considers that this narration seems to have influenced his decision: "The hearing of this story seems to have been instrumental in Janamejaya's decision to stop the slaughter, and [provoking] that effect seems to have been part of the motive of the narration" (Brodbeck, 2021a, p. 79). If we were to admit this, then the entire *Mahābhārata* would become the "persuasion of Janamejaya"; the "persuasion of Yudhiṣṭhira" in the twelfth book being nothing more than a subsidiary reflection of the purpose it serves, namely, to pacify the king who now rules the kingdom that Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers once conquered. Underlying Brodbeck's hypothesis seems to be the idea that, when narration is intended to have a certain effect on the listener, the listener becomes the main character of the story and not those who play the action in the stories told to him. The latter are tools to achieve the objective of the narration, the main character being the one who receives the story – and endows it with meaning – and not the one or those who endow it with content. "I consider the main character to be Janamejaya. In my view, the *Mahābhārata* is about him, because the *Mahābhārata* is about what happens to you when you hear it," states Brodbeck (2021b). Beyond the *phalaśruti*, those last verses where we are told all the good that will befall the one who hears or recites even one stanza of the *Mahābhārata*, it could be that this turn of phrase fulfills the initial sentence that the *Mahābhārata* accounts for everything (MBh, 1.49), for everything and everyone is susceptible to becoming part of

the plot to the extent that we allow ourselves to be transformed by it. Furthermore, can't any of us become its narrator if we have previously been a worthy narratee? Walter Benjamin claimed that the listener has to forget her/himself in order to let the story do its work within her/him; only then can the narratee acquire "the gift" of retelling it.

> For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to. The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply what he listens to is impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself. This, then, is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled. This is how today it is unraveling on every side after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship. (Benjamin, 2006, p. 149)

Seen in this light, the *Mahābhārata* could still continue to be considered an open story, not in terms of its content, but in terms of its meaning. However, this can be applied to many other works, myths, and stories: is Eros the protagonist of the myth Socrates relates in the *Symposium*? Or is it the listeners on whom the myth seeks to make its mark? Are Zeus, Achaeus, Minos, and Radamantis the protagonists of the myth of the Judgment of Souls? Or is it Callicles, whom Socrates seeks to persuade by relating this "true discourse" (*logos*)? Is the goddess Mṛtyu the protagonist of the story recounting her own birth? Or is it Yudhiṣṭhira whom Bhīṣma seeks to pacify with such a story? And is it not ultimately Janamejaya his protagonist, whom Vaiśaṃpāyana is trying to pacify by recounting Bhīṣma's long teaching to Yudhiṣṭhira? If we go beyond the indefinite limits of the *Mahābhārata*, the greatest success of Simon Brodbeck's proposal consists in

returning the weight of the story to its psychagogic function. An *itihāsa* is never an end, but a means; and this in a different way than can happen with argumentative discourse.

Arguments about the existence of the self by a Naiyāyika do not depend for their meaning on whether or not they convince the interlocutor in question. They lend themselves to debate and rejoinder, but they stand on their own regardless of the effect they have on those who receive them. In other words, their truth or falsity does not depend on the behavior they incite in the listener. However, an *itihāsa* accomplishes its task and succeeds in entrenching its meaning if it succeeds in uprooting one belief and rooting another, inciting the listener to adopt a particular behavior. Like the Buddha's *dharma* raft, its function is to get us across to a specific point on the other shore. And, in this sense, its criterion of truth cannot be separated from its moral value, which must not be merely theoretical, but which seeks to be actualized each time in each new listener. As an unverifiable discourse, often situated in *illo tempore*, the truth of an *itihāsa* can never be measured by a criterion of truth as correspondence. We will say that it is true if it is morally good, if it achieves the goal for which it was created. Obviously, such a goal must already be morally good for its fulfillment to be morally good as well. In what moral scenario this criterion of "goodness" is situated will depend on each cultural, social and human context. But, in each case, the psychagogic function that gives meaning to the story is never at the mercy of the story itself, but of the individuals who receive it. Thanks to some, the story will be true; because of others, the story will be false. Perhaps we would do better to say that, in some cases, the story will be "truthful" while, in others, it will be shown to be an inoffensive, counterproductive or simply untruthful discourse. Thus, the truth of an *itihāsa* is always beyond the *itihāsa* itself. Its authority may be rooted in tradition but its validity is at the mercy of the future, of the new individual who comes to actualize it or to deny it meaning.

The strength and fragility of all *itihāsa* come together at this point in a staggering way. Before the gaze of a Callicles, the story of the Judgment of Souls loses its *raison d'être*, it does not receive the validation it requires from the listener, and it would be absurd to say that the story does not need the acceptance of Callicles to be true. For the story exists to bring about a change in skeptical and troubled individuals like himself. Socrates insists that it is true discourse (*logos*) and not myth, perhaps to compensate for the meaning that Callicles denies to myth, –or to offset the effect of the myth that Callicles prevents from developing. But an individual doubly transformed by an *itihāsa* cannot compensate for an individual indifferent to it. Being of a popular and collective nature, belonging to the tradition and with the mission to connect us to it, the *itihāsa* has to fulfill its own destiny in each individual, succeeding in some and failing in others. If the dilemmas of *dharma* become, in the context of the *Mahābhārata*, a source of imagination for *itihāsa*-s of all sizes, colors and narrators, it is no less true that each *itihāsa* has its own *dharma*, –in the sense of duty, but also of its truth and meaning–, and this is not played out at the level of the masses and peoples, but first of all at the level of the individual and must pass the test of each person who receives it. The *itihāsa* does not lose its social function or its traditional authority because it fails before isolated individuals, but this does not exempt it from having to play its battles at the level of each individual, even if it is for the good of the group or the community. Again, the fulfillment of each *itihāsa*'s *dharma* does not depend on itself, it is at the mercy of the *dharma* of the one who hears and receives it. There has to be an "attunement of *dharmas*" between the story itself, not in the abstract but through the one who narrates it, and the listener or receiver of it. Let us think, for a moment, what if the disciples of Socrates, after listening the *epode* about the immortality of the soul, had ended up with an even more terrible fear of death than they had on listening it? What if Vasiṣṭha, after telling Rāma all those stories about

the illusory status of the world, had provoked in his disciple a staunch materialism and skepticism towards the tales worthy of a Callicles? What if Janamejaya, after having heard the story of his ancestors thanks to Vaiśaṃpāyana, had resumed with even more violence the sacrifice of the snakes? And, away from any script already written, what happens when the *Mahābhārata*, being the story of the "pacification of Janamejaya" and a book about triumph (*jaya*), generates in us a fatalistic feeling of resignation, a disabling agitation before the clutches of time that we did not perceive before we knew of the existence of the text? Could it be said that, in all such cases, the *itihāsa* has failed its own *dharma*? Or that the story has somehow deceived us?

All these questions, difficult to resolve unequivocally, face a greater problem when forms of argumentative discourse are deployed within the *itihāsa*. Let us take up, again, the story of Sulabhā. When Yudhiṣṭhira asks about the possibility of being liberated in the midst of the world he is told this story, in which the ascetic Sulabhā refutes the self-deception of King Janaka. This king boasts of having become liberated without ceasing to perform his monarchical duties, and without ceasing to live in his palace, as usual. To disprove this, Sulabhā has only to enter the king's mind, thus resorting to one of her yogic powers, provoking in him a whole series of reactions unbecoming of someone liberated. But this is proof enough for her, not for the king. To prove to the king that he is not liberated, Sulabhā does not resort to telling him any *itihāsa* situated in *illo tempore*, does not appeal to any unverifiable tradition, but articulates a lesson in rhetoric, entering into metaphysical disquisitions related to Sāṃkhya philosophy. Sulabhā's speech, articulated in arguments, does not respond to the truth-conditions of the *itihāsa* in which it is included. For if King Janaka admits his defeat, through silence, or if he instead counterargues Sulabhā's speech and is unwilling to surrender, in neither case will we say that Sulabhā's speech has failed, or that, by failing to convince his interlocutor, it has lost

its meaning. It would simply be a philosophical conflict of the usual sort. However, this debate is within an *itihāsa* who has to leave his mark on Yudhiṣṭhira, for he must learn the answer to his question by attending to the unverifiable scenario presented to him and to the enigma that the story itself proposes. It is not in Yudhiṣṭhira's power to refute it since he is not being told this story in order to question whether or not Sulabhā could or could not have entered the king's mind or whether such a debate ever took place. The *itihāsa* can be thought of and interpreted in many ways, but it is not designed to be debated or questioned as a whole; to rebuke it is already, in a sense, not to grant it validity.

If we consider that the "once-upon-a-time" reason can welcome into its bosom multiple other ways of reasoning with much narrower criteria of truth, it is no paradox that the *itihāsa* itself generates "parrhesiastic" characters, committed to truth to the extent of putting their lives at risk, if we are to understand Sulabhā as such, heeding Arindam Chakrabarti's suggestion (2014, p. 273). Interestingly, Chakrabarti (2014, p. 253) chooses to interpret Sulabhā allegorically, as if she were not a person external to King Janaka, but a voice inside the head of this king. Regardless of whether the story can give rise to this interpretation (for example, by indicating that the conversation between the two takes place in the mind of King Janaka) it is through allegory, as a famous book by Luc Brisson (2004) points out, how philosophers have been saving myths throughout history – at least, in the case of Western philosophy. From the allegorization of the Homeric poems by the Cynics, the subsequent allegorization of the Stoics, willing to turn the gods into material elements, through the Neoplatonic mystery program and its esoterization of the ancient stories, myths have been preserving their role within philosophy thanks to sophisticated hermeneutics that had to make them compatible with all kinds of dogmas that were alien to them (for example, with the dogmas of the Christian church). It has been the same with other passages of the *Mahābhārata*, some as famous as the *Bhagavadgītā*. The field of

the Kurus (Kurukṣetra) is also the field of *dharma* (*dharmakṣetra*) as we are told at the beginning of the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna (BG,1.1). In his *Gītārtha Saṁgraha*, Abhinavagupta interprets *kṣetra* as alluding to one's own body (*śarīra*), the battlefield where all *dharma*-s are to be destroyed in order to gain liberation. Another proposal by Abhinavagupta is that *kṣetra* may derive from the root *kṣad* ("to confront," "to attack") and the body would thus become the battleground of contradictory desires (GS, 1.1). Abhinavagupta's purpose, like that of Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (16th CE) and other later exegetes, was to reveal the esoteric sense (*gūḍārtha*) of the text. In his contemporary interpretation of the *Bhagavadgītā*, Mahatma Gandhi also sees the battle of *dharma* as taking place in the body of the individual. As Arvind Sharma (1978, p. 147) has shown, the figure of Mahatma Gandhi himself is to be allegorized by scholars and writers who sometimes compare him to Arjuna or Kṛṣṇa. Sharma calls this process "the dialectic of allegory" and proceeds to explain it in this way:

> Thus, while Mahatma Gandhi looked upon the *Gītā* as an allegory, he in turn has come to be looked upon in terms of the *Gītā*-allegory. The dialectic has run its full course, and one might say (pace Karl Marx) that the allegorizer has been allegorized. (Sharma, 1978, p. 149)

This dialectical process lends itself to be an infinite game insofar as everything and everyone can be allegorized. Through allegory we situate any teaching within our own existential problems, and we become its protagonists in a visceral way, not because we are the potential target of its transforming effect as listeners or narratees, but because the *itihāsa* takes place within us and its characters are nothing more than parts, forces, elements of our own life, of our own environment or of our ideas and beliefs. Paradoxically, through allegorical interpretation the

distance necessary for a story to remain so is suppressed: Kṛṣṇa represents, for example, my own inner teacher who is ready to guide me on the battlefield of life. The story no longer speaks to me but is happening within me. Through allegory the story loses all boundaries with respect to the listener, and the listener wears it as if it were a tailored suit. So that the story does not transport me into its own world, nor is there as such a "forgetting of myself" while listening to it; the "once-upon-a-time" reason is reduced to the reason for myself, my problematic and my reality, even if these are secret, esoteric, ungraspable. The ascetic Sulabhā can be interpreted as a voice inside the head of King Janaka, but also this king can be, in turn, another voice inside the head of Yudhiṣṭhira and the latter, another voice inside our heads. Even the most sophisticated and elaborate allegorical interpretations are the sign that the listener can only relate to the *itihāsa* at the cost of clipping the wings of its own creative power, for the listener can only make sense of it by understanding it as a symbolic image of herself or her closest reality – in most cases, through mechanisms of *anthropomorphization*. Whether it is the myth of Isis and Osiris in Plutarch's allegorical interpretation, or the *allegorization* of the dialogue between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, the allegory places the story in your territory (in that of your soul, in that of your inner self, in that of your head, in that of your religious or any other kind of ideas and beliefs) and no longer stands on its own. The story no longer needs the transformation of the listener to fulfill its task, since now it enjoys no independence from the listener. Properly, the latter embodies the story, if not with his/her body then with his/her ideas. The imagination that every *itihāsa* awakens in the listeners is now reduced to the imaginary of the listeners themselves; this imaginary inseminates in the story a new meaning that seemed to lie hidden in it all along.

It is worth asking whether the allegorization of myths, stories and ancient tales can be considered a hermeneutic for times of crisis. Whether in its cruder mode of application or in its more esoteric and enigmatic one, recourse to allegorical interpretation could mark the sign of the *āpaddharma* of an *itihāsa*. There is no doubt that there are allegories that were already born to be so, with a symbolic vocation; but the systematic recourse to "preserve" an *itihāsa* through its allegorization, signals that the human being can no longer allow herself to be transformed by it as it is. It seems necessary to first transform the *itihāsa* itself to adapt it to the imagination of those who receive it. The imagination, in times of crisis, withdraws into its own known universe and brings everything fantastic as close as possible to its domains –even if the latter are domains of the sacred, the secret or the transcendent. To safeguard the *dharma* of the story, it must now be read in allegorical and mystical terms close enough that they can acquire meaning in the inner life of the listener. Thus, the story no longer transports us to its own world but is now transferred to ours and there transformed for its own sake, domestic survivor of an imagination in crisis.

4. Conclusion

Narrative reason, articulated through legendary stories, myths and fantastic scenarios, opens a stage wide enough to include forms of argumentative discourse and all kinds of philosophical utterances. It becomes a useful and necessary resource at times when emotion incapacitates us to reason analytically through premises and objections. In this essay I have tried to exemplify this use of narrative reason in certain Platonic dialogues and in certain passages from the twelfth book of the *Mahābhārata*. Persuasion through *itihāsa*-s and myths does not respond to the same criteria of truth as argumentative discourse, since the meaning of its existence is placed in its psychagogic

function and the listeners acquire a privileged role, for they have the power both to save the story and to spoil it if they do not allow themselves to be transformed by it. The importance of this psychagogic function has led me to the question of the "mission" or the *dharma* of every *itihāsa*, including the *dharma* of the *Mahābhārata* itself. Although this notion is usually to be applied in the human universe and is part of the culture, the *itihāsa*-s are not a mere inanimate product resulting from the craftsmanship of human beings. Following the last traditional verses, *phalaśruti*, which we find at the end of the *Mahābhārata*, whenever we hear the story or share it, the story comes alive and manifests in us its salvific powers – i.e., it performs its psychagogic function or fulfills its *dharma*. The *itihāsa*-s are living beings resulting from the cultural efforts of those who narrate them, listen to them and share them, so they are intricate in the lives of human beings and their meaning is always at the mercy of the future, of the new narrators and listeners who will bring them to life.

I have concluded by questioning the tendency towards allegorical interpretation of stories and myths that were not originally conceived as allegories. This progressive tendency is shared by both the cultural universe of Greek myths and Indian *itihāsa*-s, which, it may be said, could betray the progressive inability of human beings to allow themselves to be transformed by the story as it presents itself. Instead, it increased the need to allegorize it to make it speak of ourselves, in a scenario in which imagination no longer plays the same role, given that the story no longer speaks to us but is situated within us (or else symbolizes esoteric and exoteric values of our own life). I have wondered whether this "omni-allegorical" hermeneutical tendency could be considered the *āpaddharma* of an *itihāsa* – and, at the same time, the sign of a crisis of the imagination. However, I would not wish by this to provide a merely negative image of the allegorical reconstruction of a story. After all, allegorization was a resource that has

saved and continues to save myths and stories present in world literature. In his work *Sūtras, Stories and Yoga Philosophy*, Daniel Raveh (2016, p.43) indicates that "perhaps *dharma* is exactly that for which one has to pay", hence the sacrifices that Yudhiṣṭhira and other characters are willing to take on throughout the *Mahābhārata* are "an indication of [their] deep rootedness in *dharma*". In the same way, when retelling and listening to many of the myths and *itihāsa*-s of the past in our 21st century we often adapt or re-signify them with the sole purpose of continuing to save an iota of our own *dharma* as narrative beings, thereby assuming the risk it entails for the original purpose of the *itihāsa* itself and for those who receive it. Nowadays, saving stories is a collective endeavor that requires both the skills of narrators and narratees, as well as those of us who study them in the academic environment.

Final Notes

[1] Willhem Halbfass warns against the misunderstanding of associating the Vedic concept of *ṛta*, which refers to a natural, cosmic and transcendent law, with the concept of *dharma*. "The fact that the sun does rise with regularity does not mean that the sun is following or fulfilling its own *dharma*. [...] *Dharma* it is the continuous *maintaining* of the social and cosmic order and norm which is achieved by the Aryan through the performance of his Vedic rites and traditional duties" (Halbfass, 1988, pp. 315-316). In his study of the notion of *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata*, James L Fitzgerald (2004b, p. 673) agrees with Halbfass: "In particular I agree with Halbfass' emphasizing that the word *dharma* is not a descendent of Vedic *ṛta* and does not refer to some kind of free-standing, overarching cosmic natural law. I see little or no basis in the *Mahābhārata* justifying this wide-spread understanding of *dharma*".

[2] All the translations in this essay of the *Śāntiparvan* are taken from James L. Fitzgerald (2004), *The Mahābhārata*. 11. *The Book of Women*. 12. *The Book of Peace*. Chicago University Press.

[3] In the context of this collective attempt at persuasion, Vyāsa (MBh, 12.34.5) will remind Yudhiṣṭhira that war has only been "an instrument of Time," therefore, neither he nor his brothers have killed anyone, they have only carried out the designs of Time expressing itself through living beings.

[4] Thus, in MBh 12.11.1 Arjuna tells him the story of Śakra (i.e. Indra) and some ascetics, but Yuddhiṣṭhira remains indifferent and in MBh 12.18.1 Arjuna tries to persuade him with another "ancient story" (*purāvṛttam itihāsam...*) about the conversation the king of Videha had with his wife. After a long attempt at persuasion through this story, Yudhiṣṭhira answers his younger brother with condescending words, stressing that he knows well the "two paths" prescribed by the Vedas, that of renunciation and that of deeds (i.e. the *nivṛtti* and the *pravṛtti-mārga*), as well as numerous learned treatises about dharma, appreciating subtleties in them that Arjuna ignores (MBh 12.19.1). Obviously, this kind of response does not take place when it is Kṛṣṇa, Vyāsa or Nārada who persuade him with stories.

[5] For example, among the eight characteristics of Platonic myths noted by Glenn W. Most (2012, p. 16), the second is that their narrator is older than his listeners.

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[6] Let us not forget, however, that reincarnation can give rise to "inverse ties" in which the age of the individual can be misleading. These are the ties in which the son is wiser than the father, precisely because he is older, that is, because he has participated in more "comings and goings," in more lives, than his own father in the current life. This happens to Sumati, in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (10-10-44), when he asks his father to stop giving him advice, for he is no child, he has already experienced too many reincarnations and knows how to act. In this conversation the family ties are reversed and we realize that biological age and the age of consciousness or memory do not always go hand in hand.

[7] In the Bombay or vulgate edition of the *Mahābhārata*, published by Citraśala Press Edition, the ancient version of this myth covers chapters 52-54 of the *Droṇaparvan*, whereas in the critical Pune edition the myth is relegated to the first appendix of the *Droṇaparvan*. Alf Hiltebeitel (1990, p. 346) questions the editor's decision to relegate this story to an appendix, for in his opinion there would be no reason to regard this Vyāsa narrative as an interpolation.

[8] As I have discussed in another essay in Spanish (Ferrández Formoso, 2022), a long chain of sympathetic pacifications takes place in this myth. Failing to find a solution to the problem of overpopulation, Prajāpati allows himself to be overwhelmed by anger (*roṣa*) and with his immense fire/energy (*mahātejas*) begins to kill creatures indiscriminately. Then Śiva intervenes to pacify him, asking him to grant the creatures the possibility of returning to life after death (i.e., the *saṃsāra)*, so that their destruction is not irreversible. From the fire of this anger that is appeased within Prajāpati will be born the goddess of Death, who must also be pacified, not because of anger, but because of the sadness that prevents her from performing the task she is ordered to do. It is added at this point, one more degree of pacification, if we take into account that this myth that Bhīṣma refers to Yudhiṣṭhira is being told by the sage Nārada to King Avikampaka to pacify his anxiety (*aśāntipara*) for the death of his son.

[9] Glenn W. Most (2012, p. 18) considers the sixth characteristic of Platonic myths to be that they "often have an explicit asserted psychagogic effect. [...] Even if Socrates is not completely convinced himself that the myth of life after death he recounts in the Phaedo is true, nonetheless he holds fast to it, using it like a magical incantation that fills him with confidence (Phaedo, 114d)."

[10] For example, Ferrari (2012, p. 67) notes: "Since there is nothing in the content of the myth to render it especially unmythical, and since, at its conclusion, Socrates issues a caveat about its complete veracity that is similar to the one he attaches to the *Phaedo* myth (114c), I assume that Socrates' unusual insistence that what he is saying is logos rather than *muthos* is provoked by the need to pre-empt Callicles' unusual strong scepticism".

[11] Even the myth of the birth of the goddess of Death to which I referred earlier is a story that Nārada swears to have heard himself (MBh,12.248), and so he relates it to King Avikampaka.

[12] Luc Brisson (2004, p. 27) claims that a "myth plays the role of a paradigm according to which, by means of persuasion rather than education, all those who are not philosophers – that is, the majority of human beings– are led to model their behavior".

[13] About this Catalin Partenie (2004, p. xix) explains: "But our human nature, Plato suggests by telling us so many myths, often permits us only to approximate to truth, and only indirectly, through a fictional narrative. This means that sometimes, for Plato, myth is only the device available to enable us to explore matters that are beyond our limited intellectual powers. Myth may be false in its fantastical details, but it may mirror the truth".

[14] The role that Vyāsa plays in terms of the metanarrative structure of the MBh is of marvelous complexity. He is at once referent, narratee, and the original narrator thanks to whom we know the story through Vaiśaṃpāyana. But his status as original narrator is associated with his status as author of the MBh and is inseparable from the pivotal role he plays as a character in his own *itihāsa*. As Sullivan (1990, p.2) points out: "Vyāsa is doubly the creator of the MBh, its author, for not only is he the reputed composer of the text but is also the creator of the Bhārata family on which the story is centered." For an in-depth study of this author/narrator/referent/narratee, see Sullivan, 1990.

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