CHAPTER 9

Reconciling Philosophy with Poetry: Olympiodorus' Interpretation of the *Gorgias* Myth

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The *Gorgias* commentary of Olympiodorus is the only ancient commentary on that dialogue which has come down to us. If only for that reason it should be of interest to Plato scholars. The modern reception of this commentary up until recently, however, has been quite unfavourable. According to E.R. Dodds (1959, 59) for instance 'the philosophical interpretations are as a rule superficial or fanciful'.[1] In the meantime, the translation, with a long introduction and copious notes by Harold Tarrant together with Robin Jackson and Kimon Lycos (1998) has helped to make the commentary better known and has encouraged new and open-minded readings of the commentary.[2]

I propose here to examine, briefly, ways in which the commentary on the myth (523a–527e) is helpful for understanding the dialogue as a whole.[3] I first concentrate on Olympiodorus' two-level or allegorical conception of myth in general, and secondly on his interpretation of punishment. In each of these first two sections I start with typical hermeneutical difficulties and then present solutions that Olympiodorus proposes. In the third and final section I address the question of esotericism in Olympiodorus.

First of all, a few words on Olympiodorus' general approach to the *Gorgias*. In accordance with the curriculum of Iamblichus, the study of the *Gorgias* is preceded by the *Alcibiades* and followed by the *Phaedo*. While the *Alcibiades* teaches that 'we are our soul' and the *Phaedo* treats the purificatory virtues

1 Beutler (1939, col. 210) wrote in 1939: 'Der Kommentar zum Gorgias ist der schwächste unter denen O.s. Er kommt über allertrivialstes neuplatonisches Gut nicht hinaus und erschöpft sich in Wiederholungen'. Westerink and Trouillard (1990, xxi): 'son contenu est des plus pauvres.'

2 Lloyd Gerson (2001, 298) remarks in his review: 'Olympiodorus is [...] especially helpful or at least interesting on rhetoric and on the concluding myth. Above all, he is perhaps actually one of the best commentators on this work when it comes to taking the dramatic structure and personae seriously without supposing that this requires emasculating doctrinal content altogether'. See in the meantime, for instance, Tarrant 1997, Renaud 2006, Opsomer 2010, Renaud and Tarrant 2015, 190–244, and for the larger context Layne and Tarrant 2014.

3 His treatment takes four lessons (46–50) and covers 32 pages of the Teubner edition for the 8 pages of Dodds' text.

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(καθαρτικαί), the *skopos* or aim of the *Gorgias* is the 'constitutional' virtues (πολιτικαί, 0.6, 6.3W), more exactly the ethical principles (ἀρχαί) leading to political, i.e. constitutional well-being (περὶ τῆς πολιτικῆς εὐδαιμονίας).[4] Olympiodorus rejects the view of those who think the dialogue is about rhetoric or justice, on the grounds that they mistake the part for the whole (the Gorgias and the Polos exchange respectively). He also rejects the previous view, considered even stranger, that the dialogue's overall target is the creator or demiurge, as it refers to in the final myth (and earlier at 507e–508a).[5] He nevertheless incorporates this interpretation, while modifying it, into his treatment of the myth: the *skopos* of the myth, in which Cronos and Zeus are central figures, is the paradigmatic cause, namely the cosmos (not the creator), 'since the statesman arranges everything with his eye on the universe, which is brimming with order, for Plato called the universe "arrangement", not "disarray"' (0.5, 5.5–8W).[6] As Harold Tarrant has shown the term 'target' (*skopos*) here means 'the paradigm employed for the discussion rather than the "subject" in our sense'.[7]

According to an ancient classification, the *Gorgias* is a dialogue of inquiry (ζητητικός), more exactly of refutation (ἀνατρεπτικός). Olympiodorus deviates from this traditional denomination in regarding it as both refutative and maieutic, critical and doctrinal: its moral teaching aims at the awakening of the common notions (κοιναὶ ἔννοιαι). Moreover, he reads the *Gorgias* especially in connection with the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*. He interprets the dramatic structure of the dialogue in three acts (with Gorgias, Polos and Callicles) as corresponding to the tripartite psychology of *Republic* Book 4: reason (λόγος), drive (θυμός) and desire (ἐπιθυμία, 0.8; 1.13). Following the philosophical

4 0.5, 3.22–24W; cf. 4.1, 30.17–19W; 32.2, 163.22–23W. In this Olympiodorus is taking his bearing from the analogy of the soul and the city in the *Republic*. On the *skopos* see also Bettina Bohle's chapter, section 8, in this volume.

5 0.4, 3.14–17W; see a similar rejection in *Anon. Prol.* 22.8–12, 39–58. Regarding the Neoplatonic view according to which the myth contains a discussion of demiurges (esp. the triad Zeus-Poseidon-Pluto), see Proclus, *Theol. Plat* v. 6.29.6–23 (cf. *Gorg*. 523a4–5) and Opsomer 2003, 13.

6 I cite the translation of JLT throughout, sometimes with slight modifications as indicated; for the *Gorgias* Zeyl's translation is used. Cf. 46.7, 240.10–12W: … ὅτι κόσμος ἐστίν, οὐκ ἀκοσμία, καὶ δεῖ πρὸς τοῦτο ὁρᾶν· καὶ νῦν δὲ λέγει τὸ παραδειγματικόν. Olympiodorus thus links closely 507e–508a with the final myth; cf. *Tim*. 90a–d. The principles of constitutional science, which the *Gorgias* is aiming at, are six: matter, form, creative cause, paradigm, instrument, and end. The material principle or cause is the tripartite soul; the formal is justice and temperance; the creative is the philosophic life; the paradigmatic is the cosmic order; the instrumental is education or habits, and the final cause is the good.

7 Tarrant 2000, p. 137.

rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* (271a–272c),[8] Olympiodorus claims different types of discourse are needed to persuade different types of souls:[9] a soul ruled by the intellect (νοῦς) can only persuaded through demonstrations (ἀποδείξεις), the soul guided by opinion (δόξα) by opinions, the one dominated by imagination (φαντασία) by myths (46.6).[10]

1 A True *logos*?

I begin, in this section, with Olympiodorus' allegorical conception of myth in general. Addressing himself to Callicles, Socrates says twice, before and after relating the myth, that he believes it to be 'true', indeed that it is not a myth but a *logos*, an account:

> Give ear then—as they put it—to a very fine account (μάλα καλοῦ λόγου). You'll think that it's a mere tale, I believe, although I think it's an account (ἐγὼ δὲ λόγον), for what I'm about to say I will tell you as true (ὡς ἀληθῆ).
>
> *Gorg.* 523a1–3; tr. ZEYL in COOPER 1997[11]

What does Socrates mean by this? Let us summarize the myth first. Socrates narrates the myth and then draws the implications from it. He first appeals to Homer's authority;[12] the protagonist of the story is none other than Zeus. The person from whom he 'heard' (ἀκηκοώς) the story remains anonymous. There still exists a law from the reign of Cronos according to which human beings who have led a just and pious life go to live on the Isle of the Blessed, while the unjust and impious are sent to Tartarus to be punished. The judiciary procedures for this law were inadequate. On the day of death, the dead appeared before the judge clothed in rich finery and accompanied by many witnesses to defend them. This law led to many erroneous judgements. Zeus instituted a crucial reform, with the assistance of his two brothers, Hades and Poseidon, by removing the foreknowledge of death and by requiring that the dead be

8 Cf. *Phdr.* 269c–272b; *Gorg.* 503a–504e, 521d–522a; 9.4. Cf. Ol., *in Alc.* 56.14–18; *Anon. Prol.* 15.1–7.

9 See Bettina Bohle's chapter in this volume.

10 There are basically two kinds of rhetoric: the true one persuades through teaching with a view to the good, the false persuades through belief with a view to pleasure (1.13, 5.13, 8.1).

11 Again at 524a8–b2: Ταῦτ' ἔστιν, ὦ Καλλίκλεις, ἃ ἐγὼ ἀκηκοὼς πιστεύω ἀληθῆ εἶναι· καὶ ἐκ τούτων τῶν λόγων τοιόνδε τι λογίζομαι συμβαίνειν.

12 The story about the passage from the reign of Cronos to that of Zeus is found in the *Iliad* (15, 187–193), but also in Hesiod, *Theogonia* (v. 453–506, 617–819).

judged naked and that the judge, too, be naked; their task was from now on to judge the naked soul, freed from the body and all deceiving dress and witnesses. Socrates then proceeds to reason (λογίζομαι) on what follows from this story (ἐκ τούτων τῶν λόγων, 524a8–b2). He again says he believes (πιστεύω) the myth is true (ἀληθῆ). Punishment of criminals fulfils two possible functions: first, to improve the souls susceptible of improvement and, second, to deter the curable criminals by presenting the punishment of incurable souls (ἀνίατος, 526b) as fearsome examples of what awaits them. Punishment (κολάζειν) alone, including physical pain, can help to free the soul from the evil from which it suffers, namely injustice. As stated explicitly in the myth and earlier, 'there is no other possible way to get rid of injustice'.[13]

Modern readers have found various difficulties with this myth. Julia Annas (1982) for instance considers it unsatisfactory in both form and content. First because it is a non-argumentative speech, and second because it defends a consequentialist conception of justice. As in the *Republic*, after arguing at great length in favour of justice as an intrinsic good, Socrates ends the discussion with a myth of the afterlife relating the rewards of the just and the punishment of the unjust. Moreover, Annas and many others find unsatisfactory the fact that Socrates uses rhetorical means, such as the appeal to Homer as witness and authority and the appeal to the emotion of fear. These devices recall those used by Socrates earlier in the dialogue (492d–494a). How can Socrates nevertheless consider this story an account (*logos*)? What is the relation between *muthos* and *logos*? Does *muthos* provide a complementary access to truth not available to *logos*? Or does myth remain an inferior form of discourse that can nevertheless be used by *logos* to reason about it, in order to draw plausible truths?

Olympiodorus in his commentary discusses myth in general first, raising three questions, namely about the origin of myth, the difference between philosophical and poetic myth, and the purpose of the *Gorgias* myth specifically (46.2, 236.16–20W). Let us consider his view of the origin of myth first. According to him, myths have two possible objects: first, nature (φύσις), and therewith, the Demiurge, and second, our soul (ψυχή; 46.2, 236.22–24W). Myths come from the need to appeal to the imagination (φαντασία). As children, we live in accordance with imagination (46.3, 237.14–15W).[14] Olympiodorus defines myth as follows:

13 οὐ γὰρ οἷόν τε ἄλλως ἀδικίας ἀπαλλάττεσθαι (525b8–c1).

14 See a similar passage in Proclus, *In Rep*. II 107.14–108.14; Cf. Sheppard 2014, 63–64.

> [A] myth is nothing other than a false statement imaging the truth [*or* falsehood picturing truth].
>
> μῦθος οὐδὲν ἕτερόν ἐστιν ἢ λόγος ψευδὴς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν; *in Gorg*. 46.3, 237.18–19W; tr. JLT mod.[15]

Since myth is an image (εἰκών) of truth, and the soul is also an image of things, 'it is reasonable that the soul enjoys (χαίρει) myths as image to image'.[16]

Secondly, Olympiodorus distinguishes poetic myth from philosophical myth. Both have advantages and disadvantages. Poetic myth (ὁ ποιητικός) has the advantage of saying things that are so evidently absurd,[17] contradictory or ridiculous[18] that the listener cannot be persuaded, and thus it encourages us to go beyond the surface meaning to seek a concealed truth (κεκρυμμένην ἀλήθειαν, 46.4, 237.28–30W).[19] The disadvantage of poetic myth, however, is that it deceives children, as these are unable to proceed to the concealed, that is 'underlying meaning' (ὑπόνοια) or the allegorical interpretation (ἀλληγορία). This is why they should not be exposed to them, and this is why Plato rejects them in the *Republic* (46.4–5, 238.20–24W). Philosophical myth has the advantage over poetic myth in that 'even if one stays with the surface meaning (ἐπὶ τῶν φαινομένων), one is not harmed' (οὐ βλάπτεται, 46.6, 239.3–5W).[20] Olympiodorus gives the examples of punishments (κολάσεις) and underground rivers (46.6, 239.5–6W). Punishment, presumably for wrongdoing, is something real and reasonable that everyone can readily understand. The surface meaning of philosophical myth expresses something similar to common notions (κοιναὶ ἔννοιαι).[21] These notions are traces of inarticulate but true insights present in everyone's mind, and the source of Socratic maieutics.[22]

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15 While this definition may owe something to Plato (*Rep*. II, 377a5–6: τοῦτο [*scil*. μύθους] δέ που ὡς τὸ ὅλον εἰπεῖν ψεῦδος, ἔνι δὲ καὶ ἀληθῆ), it does not seem typical of Platonism 'nor late Neoplatonism, though *Proc. Theol* 1.4.21.7–10 may have been influenced by it', as JLT, 290 n. 876, point out.

16 46.3. 237.19–23W: εἰ οὖν εἰκών ἐστιν ἀληθείας ὁ μῦθος, ἔστι δὲ καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ εἰκὼν τῶν πρὸ αὐτῆς, εἰκότως μύθοις χαίρει ἡ ψυχὴ ὡς εἰκὼν εἰκόνι. ἐπεὶ οὖν ἐκ παίδων καὶ ἀπαλῶν ὀνύχων συντρεφόμεθα μύθοις, δεῖ αὐτοὺς παραλαμβάνεσθαι.

17 47.6, 47.15–17W: ἀνόητον; 44.4, 229.22–30W: παντελῶς ἀνόητα.

18 There seems to be cases where the surface of philosophical myths can also be ridiculous and incredible: 49.1, 257.22–25W (γελοῖος). Cf. JLT, 312 n. 979.

19 Cf. 34.4, 176.9–10W: αὐτὸ γὰρ τὸ ἀληθὲς τὸ κεκρυμμένον ἐν τῷ μύθῳ διδάσκει.

20 Another advantage, and specific feature (ἴδιον) of philosophical myth over poetic myth is that it openly produces reasoning (ἀποδείξεις): 50.1, 261.27–28W; cf. 49.3, 260.5–8W.

21 On the epistemological importance and role of the common notions in Proclus and in Neoplatonism generally, see Helmig 2012, 270–272.

22 On the common notions in Olympiodorus, see Renaud 2006, 145–151. I shall return to these in section 3.

This would be why philosophical myths are trustworthy.[23] The disadvantage of philosophical myth, however, is this: 'since their surface meaning is not harmful, we often are content with it and do not seek the truth.' (46.6, 239.9–11W)

According to Olympiodorus, then, the final myth of the *Gorgias* is true because it is an image of a philosophical truth, that is at the second, allegorical level, while offering a salutary teaching at the surface level. But does it express a truth inaccessible to reason, that is, 'a truth of religion' as Dodds claims,[24] or rather a truth already discovered by reason, earlier in the dialogue and expressed in a way appealing to the imagination? For Olympiodorus it might, in reality, be fulfilling both functions.[25] Socrates says explicitly that the myth expresses the only *logos* that has resisted all the objections of his interlocutors.[26] That *logos* is about the damage caused to the soul by injustice or ignorance and the necessity of punishment or disciplining. The relation between surface and allegorical meanings in a philosophical myth can be rather flexible for Olympiodorus. Zeus' removal of humans' foreknowledge of death and the temporal succession of Cronos' rule to that of Zeus involve puzzles that can only be solved at the symbolic level.[27] The concealed, allegorical level, however, constitutes the core, or what Olympiodorus calls the ἐπιμύθιον, the moral, psychological teaching of the myth.[28] For Olympiodorus at any rate, the surface meaning cannot be the object of an entirely mistaken belief or ill-founded trust.[29] The

23 *Gorg*. 523a5–b1: 'Now there was a law concerning human beings during Cronus' time, one that gods even now continue to observe (καὶ ἀεὶ καὶ νῦν ἔτι ἔστιν ἐν θεοῖς), that when a man who has lived a just and pious life comes to his end, he goes to the Isles of the Blessed'.

24 Dodds 1959, 377.

25 Jackson 1995, 287, remarks: 'Thus in the *Gorgias* myth, Olympiodorus reminds us that references to individual gods and to changes within the divine world are not to be taken literally (48.8). The relevance of myths to philosophy derives from the poverty of discursive reason and language to give an account of transcendent reality'.

26 μόνος οὗτος ἠρεμεῖ ὁ λόγος (527b3–4).

27 Cf. Jackson 1995, 288.

28 34.4, 176.7–12W; cf. JLT, 282 n. 848. If the surface meaning of philosophical myth is 'not harmful', this means, as Harold Tarrant (2012, 47) has pointed out with the support of Olympiodorus (as well as of Iamblichus and Proclus), that Plato's myths should indeed be understood 'at a deeper level while not rejecting their surface reading'. Tarrant in his contribution to this volume tackles the question of the originality of Olympiodorus, which he suggests resides among others in his attentiveness to Plato's aligning diction to subject matter, and the distinction between ordinary and inspired diction.

29 On the plausibility of a surface meaning see Proclus, *In Remp*. 354.24–355.7 (cited by Tarrant 2012, 49): 'they spontaneously lead those who believe/trust (*peithomenois*) them back up to the truth of things that are, although they teach without rational considerations (*eikotôn*) or demonstrations, as if in unison with our unperverted intuitions about things'.

plausibility of surface meaning of philosophical myths would be analogous, for Olympiodorus, to the truths found in the common notions.

2 What Kind of Punishment?

Punishment in the *Gorgias* myth, as we have seen, fulfils two possible functions: reform (for curable souls) and retribution (for incurable ones). In both cases, physical pain and fear are means of dissuasion (525b1–4). These two main functions of the myth, some modern readers claim, are incompatible with the Socratic paradox, defended earlier in the dialogue. (Olympiodorus' interpretation can be read, to some extent, as a response to this twofold puzzle.) According to the Socratic paradox, what is needed to change people's way of behaving is to change their way of thinking, by means of dialogue, dialectic, not punishment. Moreover, the myth seems to suppose a conventional sense of punishment, including beating, imprisonment, exile and death. Furthermore, the deterrent effect of the eternal punishment of incurables seems pointless since it is nowhere stated that they will be born again in new bodies and so profit from it.[30] Finally, the twofold function—improving and deterring—would imply a conflict between two opposing conceptions of justice, namely as reform and as retribution, one appealing to understanding, the other to fear.[31]

Olympiodorus' allegorical interpretation rejects the literal meaning of a temporal transition from the rule of Cronos to that of Zeus, as well as the notion of eternal punishment. His non-temporal interpretation aims at solving difficulties considered otherwise unsolvable, above all the idea of faulty divine judgements (under the rule of Cronos): these errors must be human and cannot be divine. In this Olympiodorus opposes the interpretation of some of his predecessors:[32] 'there are always naked judges and always embodied ones […], and there are always bad judgments and always excellent ones'; 'it is for ever simultaneously true that our judgment is distorted and unsound, while superior beings judge divinely'.[33] This simultaneity implies that Socrates 'speaks of those who judge and are judged in this life'.[34] In other words, erroneous judgements are still being made and are most characteristic of our imperfect

30 Cf. Brickhouse and Smith 2010, 109–131; Rowe 2012, 193, 197.

31 Cf. Sedley 2009, 62, n. 16.

32 48.3, 252.14–16W; cf. Jackson 1995, 296–297.

33 48.1, 250.27–29W: καὶ ἀεὶ γυμνοὶ οἱ δικασταὶ καὶ ἀεὶ μετὰ σωμάτων […], καὶ ἀεὶ μοχθηραὶ δίκαι καὶ ἀεὶ κάλλισται.; 48.2, 251.20–22W: καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀεὶ διεστραμμένως καὶ μοχθηρῶς κρίνομεν καὶ τὰ θεῖα ἀεὶ θείως. Cf. 50.4, 265.6–10W.

34 48.9, 256.19–20W: περὶ τῶν ἐνταῦθα; cf. 523d3.

human world.[35] Olympiodorus thus offers an interesting link between the myth and the preceding argument: Socrates is really saying to Callicles that conventional rhetoric, which aims at self-defence, is not worth pursuing, since the true judges cannot be influenced by witnesses, finery or mere reputation. According to these universal judges, nature and convention are not opposed, as Callicles believes, but coincide, as true laws exist by nature.[36] Since the true judges cannot be bribed (ἀδωροδόκητοί), the rhetoric of flattery is of no value and we must not be subservient to the present judges, but 'act as autonomous agents' (αὐτοκινήτως).[37]

In other words, as Olympiodorus shows, Socrates speaks in riddles (αἰνίττεται, 48.3, 251.31–252.7W) in referring tacitly to the preceding argument (*logos*) of the dialogue, summarized immediately before the narration of the myth (522e1–6): 'For no one who isn't totally bereft of reason and courage is afraid to die; doing what's unjust (ἀδικεῖν) is what he's afraid of. For to arrive in Hades with one's soul stuffed full of unjust actions is the ultimate of all bad things'. Callicles is familiar with these myths, but as Olympiodorus points out, he 'had not penetrated [them] to their deep meaning'.[38] Thus, the enigmatic character of Socrates' speech would be twofold: first, the link between the myth and the preceding argument is only implicit; second, the notion of the intrinsic value of justice, while belonging to the 'common notions', is misunderstood by the non-philosopher. Olympiodorus' interpretation could be further explicated and defended, on the basis of Plato's text, as follows. The myth would appear to be an illustration of Socratic dialectic as punishment or disciplining.[39] The simultaneous rule of Cronos and the reform of Zeus would illustrate the

35 Tarrant 2012, 57, remarks: 'Olympiodorus is referring to the conclusions that Socrates has drawn from the myth at 524b–526d. These reflect not upon how things have been, but on how things are'.

36 46.7, 240.20–23W. Jackson writes (1995, 296–297): 'Olympiodorus does not explain on what principles some references in the myth are to be taken as simultaneously about our life here as well as about the divine, so leaving himself open to the criticism that the option is arbitrarily used to disarm difficult sections'.

37 46.7, 240.19–20W; 48.5, 253.26–28W. Here he is arguing against the defenders of astrology as determinism; he goes on (48.5, 253.28–31W): 'for it is in our power (ἐφ' ἡμῖν) to choose or not to choose virtue, as it is not something forced upon us (οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀναγκαστικόν). For there is no scope here for astrology (ἀστρολογία), for in that case providence and the administration of law and justice would be destroyed'. Against those who claim that stars have a causal effect that undermine human freedom, Olympiodorus defends the notion of freedom conceived as independence from both external events and one's own passions. On the larger context of that debate and what is at stake, see Viano 2009, esp. 74–76 and 84–85, and more recently Coope 2020.

38 49.4, 260.26–27W: διὰ βάθους οὐκ ἤρχετο αὐτῶν. Cf. JLT, 315 n. 996.

39 Cf. κολαστέος, 527b7; κολαζόμενον, 527c1; cf. 476e2, 505c4.

opposition between rhetorical refutation, which aims at gratification and self-defence, and dialectical refutation, which frees one from the greatest evil, injustice, as repeatedly stated in the myth.[40] The judiciary system before the reform of Zeus corresponds to the situation that still obtains in Socrates' times, and which will always prevail in imperfect cities, as they all are, including that of Olympiodorus.

What about the other difficulty, namely physical pain as an integral part of punishment? Olympiodorus speaks of chastising through pain (δι' ἀλγύνσεως) as the appropriate and even sole antidote against the cause of wrongdoing, namely the desire for pleasure (47.7, 248.16–18W; cf. 46.9). He compares this to 'the Hippocratic ordinance, which says that healing is by opposites'.[41] The creator (ὁ δημιουργός), that is nature in us, punishes souls, just as the doctor reprimands the patient for not following his treatment.[42] But the pain of Socratic punishment, Olympiodorus notes, is not necessarily and not primarily physical, but rather psychological or intellectual, as it aims at *understanding*:

> the true statesman (ὁ ὄντως πολιτικὸς) never aims at pleasure but always speaks the truth, even if it is painful (ἀλλὰ ἀεὶ τὰ ἀληθῆ λέγει, κἂν λυπηρὰ ᾖ), and never hides what's painful.
>
> καὶ οὐδέποτε κρύπτει τὸ λυπηρόν; *in Gorg.* 32.5, 166.27–29W; tr. JLT[43]

In other words, while Socrates does refer to physical pain and other conventional forms of punishment (imprisonment, flogging, fines, exile and death, 480c8–d3), including in the myth (524e–525a, 526e–527a), the pain Socrates has primarily in view is psychological or intellectual. He refers to conventional forms of punishment involving non-discursive means of punishment when dialectic fails, that is when facing an interlocutor who only knows and accepts a conventional conception of justice. In other words, Socrates appears to be rhetorically appealing to conventional or demotic virtue for non-philosophers such as Callicles.

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40 525b8–c1: ἀδικίας ἀπαλλάττεσθαι; cf. 471e2–472c4; 22.4, 122.20–25W on 477a7.

41 τὰ ἐναντία τῶν ἐναντίων: 46.9, 242.13–14W; cf. 50.2.

42 49.6, 261.17–23W. Olympiodorus says earlier in his commentary: 'So we ought always to pursue virtue simply for the sake of the good of the soul. For injustice always harms our very selves, for we are placed in a condition contrary to nature' (ὥστε δι' αὐτὸ τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἀγαθὸν ὀφείλομεν ἀεὶ ἀρετὴν διώκειν· ἡ γὰρ κακία ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς βλάπτει, ἐν τῷ παρὰ φύσιν γάρ ἐσμεν, 23.3, 123.10–12W).

43 Cf. 22.2, 121.22–28W: the reference to the possibility of repentance (ἐν μεταμελείᾳ), which may involve a Christian influence (cf. JLT, 170 n. 446), can be understood, it seems, as referring to Socrates notion of self-accusation or self-punishment: κατηγορεῖν δεῖν μάλιστα μὲν ἑαυτοῦ (480c1–2).

According to another objection against the punishment of the incurables as a means to improving the others,[44] this is pointless as it would be too late (since they are already dead) and there is no reference to the doctrine of the transmigration of the soul. Olympiodorus sees that the inference is necessary and interprets this aspect in the light of that unstated doctrine. Dodds defends this interpretation (1959, 375): 'although reincarnation is not mentioned in the *Gorgias*, it is, I think, implicit (see on 493c3 and 525b1–526d2). This suggests that 525 bc is based on Pythagorean doctrine. Some slight confirmation may perhaps be seen in the description of the incurable sinners as ἀνηρτημένους (525c7)'. Finally, Olympiodorus is adamantly opposed to the eternal punishment for incurable souls, and his allegorical interpretation seeks to show that it cannot be understood literally. In this he is again following other Neo-Platonic commentators, such as Syrianus, Proclus and Damascius.[45] He offers two kinds of argument. First, he argues that the meaning of the phrase 'forever' (ἀεὶ; cf. τὸν ἀεὶ χρόνον: 525c6) means only 'for the duration of a world period' (50.3).[46] Second, he refers to the Socratic conception of punishment in the rest of the *Gorgias* as corrective and necessarily beneficial (cf. 22.1). Being eternally punished would mean being forever in a state of vice and never enjoying the good (50.2). In this again Socrates is speaking in riddles (αἰνίττεται, 24.9, 132.27W). On the whole, then, Olympiodorus' two-level interpretation of the final myth allows him to respond to various hermeneutical difficulties about punishment. This in turn raises the question of his esoterism. The hypothesis I propose can be stated as follows. Hidden meanings in Plato are not limited to myth, according to Olympiodorus, but extend to Socrates' way of speaking. Olympiodorus refers once to Socratic irony as a form of enigmatic talk. This way of speaking would belong to the philosophical rhetoric of the *Phaedrus*;[47] Plato would be using it in the *Gorgias*. Moreover, Olympiodorus himself might also be employing it in modest ways.

3 Esoteric Communication?

Olympiodorus' interpretation of the *Gorgias* myth consists primarily, as I have presented it so far, in allegorizing the surface meaning of the temporal

44 Cf. the Homeric testimony, at 525e1, to Tantalus, Sisyphus and Tityus.

45 Cf. Ol., *in Phd.* 10.14; Proclus, *in Remp* 2.178.1–179.2.; Damascius, *in Phd* 1.492, 2.147. On Proclus' view on the possibility of late or postponed punishment, see *De Dec. Dub*. VIII, esp. 56.33–38.

46 Cf. 24.5; Dodds *ad* 525b1–526d2; JLT, 317 n. 1004.

47 *Phdr.* 269c–272b; *Gorg*. 503a–504e, 521d–522a; 9.4. Cf. Ol., *in Alc*. 56.14–18; *Anon. Prol.* 15.1–7.

sequence of divine rule and in seeing two different sorts of punishment, one more genuinely Socratic than the other. Moreover, we have seen that this two-level reading is not restricted to the myth but applies in some respects to the rest of the dialogue also. His allegorical reading is inseparably linked with philosophical rhetoric.[48] The surface meaning in Plato would match the cultural framework of the readers, so as to lead them, whenever possible, to the hidden meaning. The passage from the surface meaning to the concealed meaning, in philosophical myth, would imply a continuous line between the two, and hence the goodness or at any rate the usefulness of the surface meaning, as opposed to the absurd surface meaning of poetic myth. Indeed, Olympiodorus criticizes his predecessors whose search for the hidden meaning made them underestimate the surface meaning. He probably has in view, among others, those defending the theological interpretation making the demiurge the overall target (*skopos*) of the dialogue (cf. 0.4). He expresses his criticism of the theological interpretation (although he incorporates it, if somewhat modified, in his reading of the myth) as follows:

> The interpreters have not been able to grasp this because they have traversed the depths of Plato's language (διὰ βάθους χωρήσαντες τῶν Πλατωνικῶν λέξεων); for he says this clearly and emphatically, and nothing other than this.
>
> *in Gorg*. 48.3, 252.14–16W; tr. JLT[49]

Harold Tarrant has shown the important role played by the common notions in the thought and hermeneutics of Olympiodorus.[50] The surface meaning of philosophical myth appears to coincide with the main common notions, such as these: 'what is just is fine'; 'what is fine is good' (21.1–2), 'God is good' and 'one must honour one's parents' (41.2, 208.11–12W). The common notions would explain how very different names can express similar or identical ideas. He says to his Christian listeners not to be disturbed by names such as Cronos

48 See Rowe's defence of a similar two-level approach to the *Gorgias* myth and the *Gorgias* as a whole in Rowe 2012 as well as Rowe 2007, 147–152.

49 Cf. Tarrant 2012, 57.

50 See for instance Tarrant 1997, 188–192. The appropriation of the Stoic 'common notions' (or 'natural notions') goes back to Middle Platonism and possibly earlier. In Stoicism these notions, present in all human beings, result from a generalisation or abstraction from sensory experience. At Cicero's time, the Stoic term ἔννοια is linked to Platonic recollection of the forms (cf. *Tusc* 1.24.57). In connection with the common notions Olympiodorus scarcely refers to the theory of recollection, but rather to Socratic maieutics. Cf. Helmig 2012, 283 n. 106.

and Zeus and to concentrate on what they refer to.[51] Given the fragility of pagan culture threatened by the Christian majority, Olympiodorus' attitude is generally defensive and often accommodating. This is why Westerink, and others after him, has spoken of his doctrinal 'pliability'.[52] I would like to examine now, very briefly, how his 'accommodations' can conceivably be linked to his allegorical hermeneutics, in terms of what could be called his esotericism, understood in the usual sense of a secret teaching reserved for the elite and hidden from the masses.

Let us first take the example of his account of Socrates' *daimôn* in the *Alcibiades* commentary (22.14–23.4). Before proposing his 'translation' for the term *daimones*, Olympiodorus refers to the condemnation of Socrates:

> That, then, is what the commentators say concerning daimons and their allotments; but we, for our part, will attempt to run through all this in a manner that leads to reconciliation with the [views] that are current (συμβιβαστικῶς τοῖς παροῦσι). (After all, Socrates was condemned to the hemlock for introducing new daimonic [beings] (καινὰ δαιμόνια) to the youth, and believing in gods that the state did not consider gods). So it should be noted that the 'allotted daimon' (δαίμονα) is really the 'conscience' (τὸ συνειδὸς).
>
> *in Alc.* 22.14–23.4; tr. GRIFFIN 2015a[53]

It is striking that Olympiodorus in this passage combines the coded phrase 'the present circumstances' (τὰ παρόντα),[54] namely Christian consensus, with an explicit reference to the condemnation of Socrates. Given the ominous connotations of the term 'demons' to Christian ears, Olympiodorus prudently opts to translate it as 'conscience'. Given the Neo-Platonic framework to which

51 47.2, 244.8–12W: οὐ δεῖ οὖν ταράσσεσθαι πρὸς τὰ ὀνόματα ἀκούοντα Κρονίαν δύναμιν καὶ Διίαν καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα, ἀλλὰ τῶν πραγμάτων φροντίζειν. Cf. 47.3, 244.15–17W: 'When we say Cronus, do not be disturbed at the name (μὴ ταράττου πρὸς τὸ ὄνομα), but consider what I mean: for Cronus is *koros-nous*, that is pure intellect' (ἀλλὰ ζήτει τί λέγω· Κρόνος γάρ ἐστιν ὁ κόρος νοῦς, ὅ ἐστιν ὁ καθαρός); 47.5, 246.7–8W: 'And do not think that philosophers honour representations in stone as divine' (μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι οἱ φιλόσοφοι λίθους τιμῶσι καὶ τὰ εἴδωλα ὡς θεῖα).

52 Westerink 1976, 23; similarly Wildberg 2005, 321. See Demulder and Van Riel (2015, 270–275) for a defense of the opposed view according to which his Christian environment was receptive and respectful of Olympiodorus' paganism. See also note 59 on Jan Opsomer's position.

53 See also Griffin 2015, 187 n. 176 and 177.

54 On similar expressions with double entendre in Proclus, see Cameron 1969, 15–17 and Saffrey 1975, 563.

the term belongs, this accommodation would appear like a means to ensure peace with the Christian majority. In the *Gorgias* commentary, we find another telling remark, subtly autobiographical, about the dangers of teaching pagan philosophy in a Christian society. The context is the passage in the *Gorgias* (521a–522e) where Socrates explains to Callicles that he (Socrates) is fully aware he would not be able to persuade foolish persons to take unpleasant but expedient medicines:

> So too if they accuse me (ἐμοῦ ἐὰν κατηγορήσωσι), asking why I am teaching the youth, will they ever be persuaded that I do this in their interests, in order that they may become men of true quality (καλοὶ καὶ ἀγαθοί)? So under such a constitution one must create a fortress (τειχίον) for oneself, and live quietly (ἡσυχάζειν) within it all the time.
>
> *in Gorg*. 45.2, 234.10–14W; tr. JLT

The image of the threatened philosopher taking refuge behind a fortress (τειχίον) is taken from *Republic* Book 6 (496c–e). Michael Griffin begins the introduction to his translation to the *Alcibiades* commentary with this passage, and insists, rightly so I think, on the distinction between 'the many' (*hoi polloi*) and 'the philosopher' as part of the self-portrait of Olympiodorus as a Socratic philosopher and educator in uncertain times.[55] This strict distinction between the philosopher and the majority is not new; it goes back to Plato and even the Presocratics. This is why as Michael Griffin remarks, the 'pliability' of Olympiodorus with Christianity, that is his 'counciliatory approach' (Griffin) toward the majority, should be viewed in that older and larger context.[56] This, I think, has implications for the common notions. Indeed, the common notions, or at least some of them, seem to require explanations similar to the philosophical myths, namely as a token to something clearer, deeper, broader. Olympiodorus mentions a potential objection that philosophers cannot be our guide, on the grounds they disagree among themselves, and he responds to it as follows:

55 Griffin 2015, 1–2.

56 Griffin 2015, 5–6. Again in his *Gorgias* commentary (46.4, 238.16–19W), referring to the names of Greek gods to be understood allegorically: 'So they [the Ancient?] have an advantage in this respect, for they did not know that there would arise a degenerate human society (μοχθηρὸς ἔχει βίος) that respects only what is apparent (μόνον τὸ φαινόμενον), and does not search at all for what is concealed in the depths of the myth (τὸ ἐν βάθει τοῦ μύθου κεκρυμμένον).' Cf. Westerink 1990, xxvii.

> we say that in this case we put our trust (πιστεύομεν) in those who stay closer to the common notions (κοιναῖς ἐννοίαις). But there (ἐκεῖ) [in the surface meaning of myths] there are no common notions to guide our education (ἐκεῖ δὲ οὔκ εἰσι κοιναὶ ἔννοιαι). Hence we should first explicate the myths (δεῖ οὖν πρότερον ἀναπτύσσειν τοὺς μύθους).
>
> *in Gorg.* 44.7, 231.7–11W; tr. JLT

This passage does not mean that for Olympiodorus myths in general and common notions are completely unrelated, or that myths in general cannot help us in eliciting common notions from within us. Rather it is the surface meaning of myth, and especially surface meaning of poetic myth, that is unrelated to these notions. This is because the surface meaning of poetic myth is about individuals (such as the mythological figures in the *Iliad*) rather than universals, while philosophical myth is mostly about the latter, for instance the nature of soul and types of soul (such as the final myth in the *Gorgias*).[57] This is also because the surface meaning of poetic myth is absurd (ἀνόητον), according to Olympiodorus, as pointed out earlier. A little earlier he responds to another similar objection about the common notions:

> If someone says 'But these are not myths but common notions, for that one should honour the gods is not a myth', reply 'He [Plato] urged us to learn these things, not in a direct but in a Pythagorean and symbolic manner (ἀλλὰ Πυθαργορείως καὶ συμβολικῶς), yet his concealed messages (τὰ αἰνίγματα) are consistent with the common notions. So it is because these stories have been delivered in a concealed manner that he calls them myths'.
>
> *in Gorg.* 41.2, 208.14–20W; tr. JLT

According to this last quotation, common notions are compatible with, and similar even, I surmise, to the enigmas of the concealed meaning of philosophical myth, for these notions appear in need of some decoding or unfolding too. Not because the common notions are hidden—they are obvious—but because their meaning and relation to each other have to be retrieved and made fully clear so as to become genuine knowledge. For instance, in explaining the general implications of Socrates' refutation of Polos (about the goodness of justice and the necessity of punishment), Olympiodorus remarks we should not trust the many (μὴ τοῖς πολλοῖς πιστεύειν) but the knowledge in us (ἀλλ' ὄμματι ψυχῆς ἀκριβεῖ τε καὶ ἐπιστήμονι, 19.2, 107.21–28W), while also pointing out in a later

57 I am grateful to my colleague Harold Tarrant for his help in clarifying this passage.

lesson that these notions are not just a given, but that philosophy's function is to help us get *closer* to them (πλησίον, ὅσον οἷόν τέ ἐστι, γενώμεθα τῶν κοινῶν ἐννοιῶν, 27.2, 146.16–17W). The gap between the majority and the philosopher does seem to include *degrees* of awareness and understanding of those notions called 'common' as well as the ability to discern the coherence between them. On the whole, then, the esotericism of Olympiodorus appears to account for his 'pliability', understood however not as 'doctrinal' (Westerink) in nature, but as cautious presentation of it.[58]

4 Conclusion

These various considerations raise the following question. In what sense and to which extent should we speak of esoteric communication in Olympiodorus' Platonic exegesis, not only in his interpretation of Plato, especially in the case of myths, but also in his presentation of it to his audiences (and now his readers)? While Olympiodorus does not employ the term ἐσωτερικός or its cognates, he does use κεκρυμμένον ('hidden' or 'concealed') and αἰνίττεται ('speaking in riddle' or 'hinting at'), as we have seen. In the *Gorgias* commentary we find 11 occurrences of the verb αἰνίττεται, 6 of which concern the myth, the other

58 Jan Opsomer (2010, 703–705) also agrees with the notion of 'pliability' in some sense and to some extent, while insisting at the same time that Olympiodorus nevertheless sticks to the standard Neo-Platonic doctrines: the 'pliability' would not pertain to his doctrine but to the presentation of it, as I have just suggested. Opsomer's view is compatible with the notion of esotericism as applied here, although he avoids the word and even writes: 'Olympiodorus *certainly did not hide* his Hellenic religious convictions from his Christian students, but explained them while at the same time avoiding provocation' (703; my italics). I cite further remarks made by Opsomer in order to illustrate his nuanced position on this sensitive and difficult question (the italics are mine): 'The word 'daimon' had of course a bad ring for Christians. The ensuing interpretation is *ideologically safe* … Olympiodorus' attitude is not so much one of reconciliation or compromise, but rather seems to be inspired by the kind of *caution* characteristic of those living under an adverse regime … Yet in core issues he sticks to the classical Platonic position. He upholds the everlasting nature of the world (*in Gorg*. 11.2, 65.26W; *in Mete*. 118.10–119.8), argues that suicide is sometimes permissible (*in Phd* 1.9), adopts the transmigration doctrine (*in Phd* 7.4, 10.1), and rejects the theory of eternal punishment' (704). (See Simon Fortier's chapter in this volume on the vexed question of the transmigration of the soul in the *Phaedo* commentary and Harold Tarrant's contribution, which tends to diminish the status of theurgy in Olympiodorus.) Opsomer refers finally to the common notions as bridge between the two cultures: 'Nevertheless, Olympiodorus is not blind to the substantial agreement between Christianity and Platonism, grounded, he believes, in shared—while innate—common notions, from which our most important metaphysical and moral principles derive (*In Alc*. 131.12–14, 114.11–12)' (705).

5 occurrences pertain to other sections of the dialogue.[59] The most obvious function of Olympiodorus' esoteric communication would be self-protection from persecution. But there are possible pedagogical reasons too: concealing forces the able listeners, or readers, to work out the hidden truths for themselves. This implies excluding the unprepared. This Olympiodorus says in so many words in the case of philosophical myth:

> These [philosophical myths] are also constructed so as not to transmit doctrines indiscriminately (μὴ ὡς ἔτυχεν). For just as in temples the sacred objects and mysteries are behind screens (παραπετάσματα), so that the unworthy (οἱ ἀνάξιοι) do not see them indiscriminately, so here too myths are screens for doctrines, so that they are not uncovered (ἵνα μὴ γυμνὰ) and accessible to anyone who wants.
>
> 46.6, 239.12–17W; tr. JLT

In the *Prolegomena* preceding his commentary to the *Categories* (11.39–12.13) Olympiodorus applies this idea to myths in general.[60] There he also remarks (11.21–12.17) that deliberate obscurity (ἀσάφεια) aims at discouraging the superficial reader and to spur the serious one (ὁ σπουδαῖος) on to make great efforts to understand the text. This, he says, not only applies to Aristotle but to Plato also (καὶ Πλάτων). This esoteric communication, associated with Pythagoreanism, would then both reveal the truth to the philosophical reader and conceal it from the uninitiated.[61] In the case of Plato and the *Gorgias*, the two-level approach to myth seems in some ways to apply to non-mythical passages, thus linking the myth to the rest of the dialogue, as in the case of the notion of punishment. That notion, as we have seen, is used simultaneously in two senses,

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59 Cf. 1.3, 10.22–27W; 11.3, 67.10–19W; 12.5, 75.2–3W (associated here with irony, *ad* 462b11); 24.4, 131.19W: 24.9, 132.26–133.3W.

60 See also Elias, *in Cat*. 124.32–125.2, Proclus, *Theol* 1.4.21.7–12. Cf. JLT, 292 n. 885; Jackson 1995, 28. For the larger context of esoteric reading in late Antiquity, see Mansfeld 1994, 158–159, 202–203 and Steel 2013.

61 Concerning the 'noble falsehood' of the *Republic* Book 3 (414b9–e1: γενναῖόν τι ἓν ψευδομένους), Olympiodorus remarks that this myth of the three races sprung from the soil will lead these persons to serve well (εὐεργετήσωσι) the city they believe to be indigenous to (44.3, 229.14W). In this case the surface meaning might not be allegorically true, it would rather be false but useful as is (that is it would be 'exoteric', cf. Most 2012). Similarly, Diogenes Laertius (3.63) remarks about Plato: he 'has employed a variety of terms in order to make his system less intelligible to the ignorant' (Ὀνόμασι δὲ κέχρηται ποικίλοις πρὸς τὸ μὴ εὐσύνοπτον εἶναι τοῖς ἀμαθέσι τὴν πραγματείαν; tr. Hicks 1972). The distinction between the 'many' and the philosophic 'few' is key in the famous cave analogy of the *Republic* as well as in the *Seventh Letter* (341d4–342a1). Cf. *Tim*. 28c3–5.

namely the conventional and the specifically Socratic sense. Good rhetoric would thus have two basic functions, equally legitimate but quite different: one seeking to demonstrate, the other to persuade; one appealing primarily to reason, to other to the imagination; one conveys virtue with knowledge, the other virtue with inarticulate knowledge, that is true opinion without a rational account of it (46.6, 239.18–30W).[62]

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62 Cf. the distinction in the *Gorgias* (454d1–e2) between two basic kinds of rhetoric: one that conveys knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), the other only belief or opinion (πίστις).

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