

Marc-Antoine Gavray

Plato's *Phaedrus* as a Manual for Neoplatonic Hermeneutics: Inspired Poetry and Allegory in Proclus

As H.D. Saffrey points out in a famous article, the attempt to harmonise theological traditions is characteristic of Athenian Neoplatonism.¹ Whether they originate from Homer, Orpheus, Plato, or the Chaldean Oracles, all traditions lead us to the same truth about the gods, whatever the diversity of their ways of talking about the divine. The result is a balancing act that involves, amongst other things, reconciling Plato and the epic poets. When opening his sixth essay on the *Republic*, Proclus indeed raises the following issue:²

It recently occurred to me, in my address on Plato's birthday, to examine the problem of how one might compose an appropriate response, on Homer's behalf, to the Socrates of the *Republic*, and show Homer's teachings to be perfectly in harmony with the nature of things, and most of all, with the positions taken by the philosopher himself, about both divine and human matters, and [so] save Plato from his self-contradictions and show, in sum, that both what he wrote in praise of Homer's poetry and what he says in criticism, all of this comes from a single body of wisdom, a single intellectual position, a single marvellous plan. (I 69.23–70.7 Kroll, tr. Lambertson)³

In the *Republic*, Plato seems opposed to Homer and to poetry in general, a position which disrupts the accord between the theological traditions. Why does Plato so harshly refute a poet whom the Neoplatonists see as one of the great educators on divine subjects? Are they wrong to consider him an authority? Or, on the contrary, does Plato contradict himself when he sometimes declares Homer to be a 'divine

1 Saffrey 1992.

2 Contrary to Proclus' other Commentaries, that on the *Republic* does not follow the lemmatic form. It consists of a set of seventeen thematic studies of variable length (some of which are incomplete), written at different times. The fifth and sixth essays both deal with books II and III, but from contrasting perspectives.

3 As noted by Sheppard 1980, 141, the sixth essay aims to resolve this contradiction.

Note: This article is a continuation of that of Pieter d'Hoine in the present volume, of which it shares the theoretical perspective and the methodological reservations. I thank Simon Fortier for revising my English, as well as for his thought-provocative suggestions. All mistakes are evidently my own.

Marc-Antoine Gavray, FRS-FNRS/ULiège

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poet', and at other times holds him to be thrice removed from the truth?⁴ For Proclus, solving this difficulty involves adjusting reading strategies by setting up a hermeneutics adapted to the different registers of authority. With regard to inspired poetry and myth, the key is not found in the *Republic*, but in the *Phaedrus*. This dialogue plays a major role in later Neoplatonism. It not only furnished numerous doctrinal points, e.g. on intellection or on metempsychosis,⁵ but was also held to answer the following question: how are we to read poets and, accordingly, how are we to reconcile them with Plato? It is this latter role that I shall examine here.

1 Poetic Inspiration in the *Phaedrus*

Plato constantly refers to the poets in the dialogues, whether it is the debate around Simonides in the *Protagoras*, the chain of poetic inspiration in the *Ion*, the dispute between comedy and tragedy in the *Symposium*, the identification of poetry with flattery in the *Gorgias*, or the examination of *mimesis* and the status of the poet in the *Republic*.⁶ However, he reserves the *Phaedrus* the role of placing poetic inspiration amongst the divine inspirations – alongside prophecy, the telestic art, and love – capable of providing us with something that sanity alone cannot procure (244a–245c). Thus, at the beginning of the palinode, Plato writes that

Third comes the kind of madness (μανία) that is possession (κατοκωχή) *by the Muses*, which takes *an unresisting and inviolate soul* (ἀπαλὴν καὶ ἄβαντον ψυχὴν) and *awakens* (ἐγείρουσα) *it to a Bacchic frenzy* (ἐκβακχεύουσα) of songs and poetry that *sets in order the myriad deeds of the ancients and instructs posterity* (τοὺς ἐπιγιγνομένους παιδεύει). If anyone comes to the gates of poetry and expects to become an adequate poet by acquiring expert knowledge of the subject without the Muses' madness, he will fail, and *the poetry of the man who is sane will be eclipsed* (ἡ τοῦ σωφρονοῦντος ἡφανίσθη) *by the poetry of men who have been driven out of their minds*. (*Phdr.* 245a1–8, tr. Nehamas & Woodruff, slightly modified, I use italics for the elements that Proclus highlights.)

This passage affirms the superiority of the poet whose verses come directly from the divine over the one who simply exercises an art, which resonates like the rehabilitation of poetry. Compared to other dialogues, the *Phaedrus* establishes

⁴ See Plato, *Phd.* 95a, and *Resp.* X 597e.

⁵ Besides his contribution to this volume, I refer the reader to Fortier 2018a.

⁶ For an overview of these issues, see Destrée & Hermann 2011.

less the ignorance of the poet than the need to go beyond art through inspiration. The *Ion* confronts the rhapsodist with his passivity, which reduces him to the vector of divine power (θεία δύναμις, 533e).⁷ The *Republic* challenges all true knowledge of the poet and lowers him to the level of a copy of a copy (X 601a–b). The *Phaedrus* on the other hand legitimates poetry by attributing to it a knowledge of divine origin that goes beyond technique. It is in this context that, according to the decree of Adrasteia, the dialogue places the technician-poet at the sixth rank amongst the types of lives, hardly more worthy than the artisan or the farmer, whereas it places the μουσικός, the one who is penetrated by the Muses and love, at the first rank, alongside the philosopher and the lover of beauty (248d–e). Thanks to the image of the erotic mania, which seizes the philosopher as the Muses seize the poet – Socrates claims to be possessed by local deities (νυμφόληπτος)⁸ –, the *Phaedrus* goes beyond the too clear-cut division between divine possession and the exercise of the intelligence: by combining reminiscence with dialectic, it allows the philosopher to reach a knowledge of the truth in a way which closely resembles inspiration.

The connection between the inspired poet and the philosopher will greatly influence Proclus. In his eyes, this passage of the *Phaedrus* allows us to restore the harmony between Homer and Plato, as it provides a point of entry for the poet and for poetic inspiration.

2 The Characteristics of Inspired Poetry: The Lesson of the *Phaedrus*

In the *Commentary on the Republic*, Proclus distinguishes three forms of poetry, which he arranges in a descending order: inspired, scientific, and mimetic, the last of which he subsequently divides into art of copying and art of appearance.⁹ From this perspective, he follows the *Phaedrus* in asserting the superiority of inspired poetry. He also draws from the theory of the image in the *Republic* (X 601b–602b, 603b–d) and the *Sophist* (235b–236d) to add the genre

⁷ Cf. *Ion* 534b–c. On the relationship between *Ion* and *Phaedrus*, see Gonzalez 2011. As this author shows, the comparison between the *Ion* and the *Phaedrus* emphasises the philosopher's superiority over the poet, as the first is not only the vehicle of a divine message but an interpreter capable of giving it a meaning (i.e. reminiscence).

⁸ Plato, *Phdr.* 238d1; cf. 241e3–5 : ὑπὸ τῶν Νυμφῶν... σαφῶς ἐνθουσιάζω.

⁹ Proclus, *In Remp.* I 178.6–179.32.

of mimetic poetry.¹⁰ Proclus' poetic theory does not come from a single source in Plato, but is the result of the cross-pollination of several dialogues. However, to describe inspired poetry, Proclus considers our passage from the *Phaedrus* (245a) central. He extracts several ideas from it, paraphrases them, and comments its words very closely in order to identify four essential characteristics.

Firstly, as inspired poetry finds its original and primordial cause in the Muses, Proclus considers that it instils the mark of the divine proportion into the possessed soul, since its rhythms and measures come directly from the divine (I 180.17–181.2; 178.28–29). Poetic inspiration is a *possession* (κατοκωχή), in the sense that it takes possession of what it moves, and a *madness* (μανία) in the sense that it draws the soul out of itself: it brings about a contact with the divine in which the soul goes out of itself and settles in its cause. The superiority of this poetic form is thus the result of the self-transcendence that it brings about for the soul. This, at least, is how Proclus understands the assertion that “madness from a god is finer than sanity of human origin, according to the testimony of the ancients,” and the degree of reality with which the soul is brought into contact.¹¹ As a result, inspired poetry provides a means of accessing higher realities.

Secondly, the ‘unresisting and inviolate soul,’ the one which undergoes inspiration according to Plato, becomes in Proclus the soul receptive to divine illumination, as opposed to the ‘hard and resistant soul’ which hinders it.¹² Proclus retains from the *Phaedrus* that it is this receptivity that allows certain souls to contemplate the true realities during their divine stay. He associates this property with an ἐπιτηδειότης (I 181.17–19), which, in the Neoplatonic vocabulary, refers to a first power and a disposition towards a given capacity.¹³ He does not exclude *a priori* that every soul undergoes poetic inspiration. However, only the soul which has already acquired this disposition (προειληφέναι: I 181.13), i.e. only the soul that has made an effort to get out of itself and to turn away from what is foreign to the

¹⁰ According to Sheppard 1985, 85–103, the theory of three types of poetry is an original development of Proclus from a simpler division in Syrianus between inspired poetry and uninspired poetry. I refer to her chapter 5 (162–202) for a detailed analysis of the three poetic forms in Proclus.

¹¹ Plato, *Phdr.* 244d3–4: κάλλιον μαρτυροῦσιν οἱ παλαιοὶ μανίαν σωφροσύνης τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ τῆς παρ' ἀνθρώπων γιγνομένης; 245a8: ἡ τοῦ σωφρονοῦντος ἡφανίσθη. Compare with Proclus, *In Remp.* I 178.24–25: μανία μὲν ἐστὶν σωφροσύνης κρείττων. The idea comes again at the very end of the passage, in *In Remp.* I 182.16–20.

¹² *In Remp.* I 181.5: σκληρὰ καὶ ἀντίτυπος, which reminds *Thet.* 155e8: σκληροὺς γε λέγεις καὶ ἀντιτύπους ἀνθρώπου.

¹³ On ἐπιτηδειότης in a Neoplatonic context, see Aubry 2008, 141–147. Van Riel 2009, 238, cleverly suggests that ἐπιτηδειότης also refers to the receptivity of something to the operations of the higher realms.

divine, is susceptible to a divine inspiration. For Proclus, the soul should not be satisfied with being ‘unresisting and inviolate’ by nature. It must become so by getting rid of everything that distracts it from the divine cause (e.g. external impressions, or even itself). The difficulty of this task explains why poetic inspiration is limited to a few individuals, because it not only supposes that one possesses a natural disposition towards divine inspiration, but also implies that one has put in the work to actualise this disposition by getting rid of all that is likely to obscure it.

Thirdly, Proclus stresses that Plato indicates that this disposition and the inspiration from the Muses work together to awaken and enrapture the soul (ἀνεγείρειν τε καὶ ἐκβαλχεύειν: I 181.20). By adding the prefix ἀν- to Plato’s original ἐγείρω, Proclus emphasizes the converse aspect of awakening. Inspiration turns the soul from becoming and raises it to the divine. As for the Bacchic exaltation, it illustrates the procession in which the soul moves around the divine and keeps its attention fixed on it. These two joint effects keep the soul of the inspired poet in contact with what transcends him, from which we can deduce that inspired poetry operates at this higher level.

Fourthly, Proclus highlights the didactic aspect of inspired poetry, turning to its listeners:

As far as ‘setting in order the myriad deeds of the ancients’ (*Phdr.* 245a3–4) is concerned, and through these ‘instructing posterity’ (245a5), it is clear in advance that he is saying that this kind of poetry renders human things more perfect (τελειότερα) and more radiant (λαμπρότερα) through the divine and that true education comes from this poetry for those who hear it. This inspired kind of poetry should by no means be deprived of its capacity to educate. (*In Remp.*, I 181.30–182.4, tr. Lamberton, I add the quotation marks)

Before any aesthetic considerations, the primary purpose of inspired poetry is education (παιδεία). While scientific poetry participates in virtue through its counsels and remembers the revolutions of the soul (I 179.9–15), and imitative poetry produces no more than representations (I 190.20–25), inspired poetry offers the highest παιδεία, by virtue of the principle of procession according to which all power that a lower form possesses also belongs more eminently to the higher form.¹⁴ The reasoning behind this is epistemological. Inspired poetry goes beyond strictly human discourse because “human conceptions (ἐπιβολαί) are in every way inferior to the gift of the gods” (I 182.19–20). It is in these terms that Proclus translates the superiority of divine madness over sanity: inspired poetry captures divine principles in a way that transcends human intelligence, that is, in a mode closer to union with the divine principles. And to the extent that it

¹⁴ Deceptive poetry aims only at the pleasure by deforming the representation, *In Remp.*, I 191.19–25.

is full of the gods, it spreads the higher truth. Also, unlike other forms of poetry, it addresses adults who have already received the initial education and now feel the need “to hear a more mystical teaching about the divine.”¹⁵ In fact, it expects the listener to put himself in a state of mind similar to that of the poet himself in order to access his message. For this reason, everything in it must be interpreted not only in view of its educational aim but also in accordance with the idea that its stories, while apparently human, in fact refer to the divine whose illumination they aim spread.

Proclus draws his manner of reading inspired poetry from this short passage of the *Phaedrus*. This poetry, he holds, is an act that transcends human reason and discourses. This is the hermeneutic filter that he will systematically invoke in his interpretation of inspired myths.

3 A Useful Complement: The *Ion*

Although Proclus attributes a central role to the *Phaedrus* with regard to inspired poetry, he does not exclude another dialogue, the *Ion*, whose contribution he takes to be threefold. First, it justifies the superiority of inspiration over technique (533d) in the name of the Neoplatonic privilege of the one over the many: the unicity of the products of inspiration attests to a divine power (θεία δύναμις) and exceeds the ability of technical poetry to produce the same effects in similar cases (I 182.21–183.8). Secondly, the *Ion* (533e) relates divine inspiration to a single monad generating the series, what Socrates indicates when speaking of the Muse in the singular, whereas in the *Phaedrus* (245a1) he uses the plural (I 183.27–184.2). Poetry ultimately goes back to a single, first, driving cause of the chain. Finally, the *Ion* celebrates the superabundant fertility of the principle and describes the mechanism of participation (I 184.7–10): the metaphor of the stone of Heraclea sets out the transmission of inspiration to its last echoes. Participation is carried out step by step, by means of a progressive dissemination: a single god inspires several poets, poets communicate their inspiration to many rhapsodes, and rhapsodes tell their stories to a larger number of listeners. Proclus deliberately avoids going into too much detail on this question, but his reading at least highlights the need to be part of the chain of inspiration to interpret the poet’s words. This is the

¹⁵ Proclus, *In Remp.* I 182.6–13. Cf. I 140.14–17 (where Proclus paraphrases *Phdr.* 245a, on behalf of poets); I 79.18–26; I 161.30–162.2. Again, Proclus justifies it by the superiority of divine delirium over sanity, I 84.12–19 (cf. *Phdr.* 245a8).

only way to return to the first principle because, to understand Homer and to seize the secret good concealed in his verses, one must be divinely inspired (I 79.18–26).

The *Ion* offers a useful complement to the *Phaedrus* in the lesson on inspired poetry, but its contribution is more limited. Nothing is said about the disposition of the soul, the effect of possession, or even of the content to be transmitted. Similarly, other dialogues confirm that inspired poets are the main messengers of ‘divine and mystical thoughts,’ stressing the need to legislate to keep young people away from stories whose understanding is inaccessible to them (a measure of public safety which does not diminish this poetry’s value or relevance).¹⁶ The *Phaedrus* remains Proclus’ privileged source regarding the interpretation of inspired poetry, the only dialogue to explain why one should not exclude the poets definitely from the city and to describe the nature of the poet’s contact with the divine. Therefore, to interpret the poet’s message, one must grasp the nature of this contact. Once again, it is the *Phaedrus* that allows this.

4 Lives of the Soul, Poetic Forms

In the *Commentary on the Republic*, Proclus introduces his theory of poetry through a distinction between three lives (ζωαί) or three states (ἔξαις) of the soul, in order to associate each poetic form with one of these lives (I 177.14–178.5). He concludes by asserting the superiority of inspired poetry less on formal or stylistic grounds than on psychological and epistemological ones. Here is what he says about the first life, which he immediately associates with inspired poetry. It is

the best and the perfect life, in which the soul is contiguous with the gods and lives the life that is most closely related to them and made one by its extreme resemblance to them. The soul belongs not to itself but to them, surpassing its own intellect and awakening in itself the secret symbol of the unified substance of the gods, and attaching like to like, the soul’s own light to the transcendent light and the most unified element of its own being and life to the One beyond all being and life. (*In Remp.* I 177.15–23, tr. Lamberton slightly modified)

In the light of the four rules we have set forth, we immediately see how the soul of the inspired poet lives the most perfect life: 1) it is directly related to the gods (the Muses), 2) it no longer belongs to itself but to them, 3) it has undergone an awakening that elevates it beyond the level of human reasoning, 4) it has assimilated its light to that other which transcends it. If the poet can tell the truth about the gods, it is because his psychic way of life is similar to them, though not

¹⁶ Proclus (*In Remp.* I 185.8–186.21) quotes *Leg.* III 682a; *Tim.* 40d; *Resp.* II 378d; even *Alc.* 2 147b–c.

because he has knowledge of them. The life proper to inspiration implies that the soul goes beyond its own intellect, beyond knowledge even, and settles into an ineffable unity with the divine.¹⁷ With these words, Proclus attempts to account for an experience that goes beyond reason: inspiration is for the poet the confrontation with a supra-human reality. It is a non-discursive experience, but one which pushes him to express in words this unitary symbol of which he now bears the mark. The interpreter must, therefore, draw from the poet's words the trace of this primordial unity.

The status of poetic inspiration raises the question of its relation to philosophy. In what way does the psychic state of the poet differ from the philosopher's if they both reach the highest principles? Does the poetic life exceed the philosophical life or are they of the same rank? In other words, what is the status of their respective discourses? The answer emerges in the following set of equivalencies proposed by Proclus: what prophecy is to truth, erotic madness is to beauty and poetry to proportion.¹⁸ There is a parallel passage in the *Platonic Theology*, where Proclus associates truth to the φιλόσοφος, beauty to the έρωτικός, and proportion to the μουσικός (III 13, 63.16–21). These passages echo the *Phaedrus*, though with a slight rewording of the dialogue's contents. On the one hand, Proclus blends the list of inspirations (244a–245c) with the decree of Adrasteia, according to which the μουσικός (who is also έρωτικός) occupies the first rank together with the φιλόσοφος and the φιλόκαλος (248d). On the other hand, he omits an element in order to arrive at a convenient triad, the telestic, and identifies the φιλόκαλος with the έρωτικός. This modification allows him to insert another cardinal doctrine of Neoplatonism, that of the three monads derived from the *Philebus*: truth (ἀλήθεια), beauty (κάλλος) and proportion (συμμετρία).¹⁹ It is to these that the types of inspiration correspond, and it is, therefore, these that make the order possible.

As Joseph Combès has shown, these three monads in Proclus fulfil a dual *ontogenetic* and *theophanic* function, in the sense that they not only compose the first mixture (the Being) but also constitute the first effects of the One, which can be observed in all things and make all things intelligible. The link

¹⁷ In agreement with Sheppard 1985, 174. The epistemological status of divine inspiration, beyond the domain of inspired poetry, was studied by Fortier 2015.

¹⁸ Proclus, *In Remp.* I 178.29–179.3: ὥσπερ οὖν κατὰ μὲν τὴν ἀλήθειαν τὴν μαντικὴν, κατὰ δὲ τὸ κάλλος τὴν έρωτικὴν μανίαν ὑφίστασθαι λέγομεν, οὕτως ἄρα καὶ κατὰ τὴν συμμετρίαν τὴν θείαν τὴν ποιητικὴν ἀφωρίσθαι φαμέν.

¹⁹ Plato, *Phil.* 64c–65b: Having reached 'the threshold of the good,' Socrates states the three characters by which it will be possible to grasp it (κάλλει καὶ συμμετρίᾳ καὶ ἀληθείᾳ, 65a2) if it cannot be grasped directly.

that Proclus draws with the triad of the *Philebus* thus emphasizes that inspiration, in its main forms, goes back, if not to the One itself, then at least to its first manifestations at the level of Being, as it is intelligible.²⁰ And, from this viewpoint, poetry shares the first rank with the other two forms of inspiration. For its part, it attaches itself primarily to proportion, i.e. to the productive property of unity within the mixture that is hypostatic Being (*Theol. plat.* III 11, 43.12–22). Nevertheless, according to the principle that “all things are in all things, but in each according to its proper nature” (*El. theol.* § 103), poetry also has access to truth and beauty. These two ideas may be central in determining the relative rank of poetry, depending on the level of reality it gives access to. This is without taking into account the fact that Proclus hesitates about their hierarchy, probably because his source texts offer two distinct sequences: φιλόσοφος, φιλόκαλος, μουσικός and έρωτικός in the *Phaedrus*; κάλλος, συμμετρία, and αλήθεια in the *Philebus*.²¹

In an essential chapter of the *Platonic Theology* (III 13, 62.14–63.21), Proclus uses alternately the two series: συμμετρία, αλήθεια, κάλλος and αλήθεια, κάλλος, συμμετρία (the second one being that of the *Phaedrus*). With the first series, Proclus insists on the causal dimension, as the series describes the constitution of the intelligible: “For the mixture, proportion is the cause of the unity of its being, truth is the cause of its reality, and beauty is the cause of its intelligibility.”²² In the second series, he follows the order of the manifestation or expression, i.e. the order of the perception of intelligible properties in the mixture.²³ Proclus’ ambiguity on the subject therefore prevents us from giving priority to philosophical inspiration or poetic inspiration. We may say, at most, that the poet appears to be more closely associated with the constitutive series and the unity of the mixture, and the philosopher with the series of the manifestation and its existence. This at least explains why the discourse of the latter is clearer, while that of the former is at first glance more obscure and confused, insofar as

²⁰ Proclus wrote a *monobiblos* ‘On the three monads,’ of which Combès 1996 offers a reconstruction on the basis of *Platonic Theology* III.

²¹ Unlike Damascius, for whom the hierarchical sequence is firm: “From this the nature and order of the three monads is clear: highest is (in a series that is, nevertheless, coordinate) Truth; after it comes Beauty, for a thing has to be what it is, and only so can it be desirable to others and inviting; third is Proportion, because it manifests itself rather in differentiation and in the harmony of things mixed.” (*In Phil.* §236.21–27, tr. Westerink) Damascius follows the order of the *Phaedrus*.

²² Proclus, *Theol. plat.* III 11, 43.20–22; cf. III 13, 62.14–20; 63.9–16.

²³ Cf. Proclus, *In Remp.* I 175.29–179.3; I 295.18–28; *Theol. plat.* III 13, 62.20–63.9; 63.16–21. The nuance is highlighted by Combès 1996, 236.

he adopts the viewpoint of the intelligible mixture. In this sense, neither prevails over the other. They simply adopt different perspectives.

The comparison with the fifth essay on the *Republic* adds further confusion. In the examination of Plato's notion of μουσική, Proclus argues that the term designates a genus whose four species are not situated on the same plane and concludes bluntly that philosophy is superior to poetry.²⁴ With the help of the *Phaedo*, he identifies philosophy with the highest μουσική, insofar as it harmonizes the soul, commands the human and celebrates the divine.²⁵ Μουσική thus belongs first and foremost to the philosopher, who is capable of educating by his 'intellective songs' (I 57.17). The next two species come from the *Phaedrus*. The second is the inspired μουσική of the poet, the one that teaches by the example of past deeds (unlike the lawgiver who teaches by universal models).²⁶ Without being inspired by the gods, the third one "nevertheless leads upward from perceived harmonies to the invisible beauty of divine harmony" (I 58.28–59.1). This μουσικός is identified with the φιλόκαλος of the decree of Adrasteia and associated with the ἐρωτικός, both of whom raise themselves from the sensible beauties to the intelligible ones, the one through hearing, the other through sight. For this reason, they are related to the philosopher, who passes from the sensible to the intelligible forms (I 59.3–16).²⁷ This third species in the order of presentation is, therefore, the second in the order of the ascent to the principles. The fourth kind is the didactic poetry of *Republic* II–III, which, when submitted to politics, educates by harmonies and rhythms (I 59.20–60.6).

The description contrasts sharply with the sixth essay since Proclus here differentiates what he identifies there. Inspiration is no longer the assimilation to the divine principles, and inspired poetry is reduced to what Proclus elsewhere calls *scientific* poetry. The whole scale of inspiration is thus devalued, in favour of another access to the divine, the one that characterizes philosophy more properly. Why such a variation? Because of the context, Anne Sheppard answers.²⁸ In the fifth essay Proclus acts as an exegete of the *Republic* who takes care to give a clear account of the *Republic* for a large and diverse audience, remaining on the surface of the text, while in the sixth essay he develops his own theory of poetry, where inspiration plays an essential role in the access

²⁴ Proclus, *In Remp.* I 42.28–43.3; 56.20–60.13. This is the fifth question.

²⁵ Cf. Plato, *Phd.* 61a3: φιλοσοφίας μὲν οὔσης μεγίστης μουσικῆς; and Proclus, *In Remp.* I 57.8–9: λέγομεν οὖν καὶ τὴν φιλοσοφίαν αὐτὴν μεγίστην εἶναι μουσικὴν.

²⁶ At *In Remp.* I 57.25–29, Proclus quotes *Phdr.* 245a5–8, then paraphrases 245a3–5.

²⁷ Hermias gives the same association, considering the φιλόκαλος as the genus of which the μουσικός and the ἐρωτικός are the species, *In Phdr.* 174.1–7 L–M.

²⁸ Sheppard 1985, 18–20 and 25–29.

to the highest divine principles. According to this reading, the fifth essay contains only a provisional hermeneutics, intended for readers incapable of grasping the truth about inspiration and accurately interpreting Homer, readers in the position of the philosophers of the *Republic* during the process of education, not yet able to understand these remarks according to the secret doctrine (κατὰ τὴν ἀπόρρητον θεωρίαν) inspired by the Muses, but only according to their apparent meaning (κατὰ τὸ φαινόμενον: I 140.11–19). Thus the fifth essay would not fundamentally call into question the idea that inspired poetry shares the first rank with philosophy. According to Proclus, Plato's treatment of poetry in the *Republic* is largely unconcerned with divinely inspired poetry.

5 Saving Homer (1): The Way of Inspiration

If the *Republic* insists on the need to conceal violent stories from the young and liberally rewrites famous episodes from lyric poetry, it provides neither the key to decipher them nor the reason as to why they should not be dismissed entirely. Only the four principles established in the *Phaedrus* allow Proclus to justify the value and function of these stories. These four principles alone restore the harmony between Homer and Plato, and remove the difficulty raised at the beginning of the sixth essay. They thus provide the theoretical framework for reading not only the inspired poets, of which is Homer amongst the foremost, but also the passages of the dialogues where Plato deals with Homer and inspired poetry. Let us see how Proclus applies them by looking to an example taken from Homer's *Nekyia*, where Odysseus recounts seeing Heracles, or rather

his image; he himself, among the immortal [gods]
is happy in the midst of good cheer, and has Hebe of the pretty ankles²⁹

which Proclus, when he discusses the Platonic criticism of the poetic representation of death and the kingdom of Hades (*Resp.* III 386a–387c), comments as follows:

How is this as well not part of the *inspired Homeric tradition* (ἐνθέου παραδόσεως), to distinguish the *soul* both from its *ghostly image* (εἶδωλον) and from its *intellect* (τὸν νοῦν τὸν τῆς ψυχῆς) and to say that the soul makes use of the image and that the intellect is more divine than the other two? And furthermore, that the image and the soul are in some

²⁹ Hom., *Od.* XI 602–603 (tr. Lambertson): εἶδωλον· αὐτὸς δὲ μετ' ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσι / τέρπεται ἐν θαλίῃς καὶ ἔχει καλλίσφυρον Ἥβην. Proclus quotes these verses in *In Remp.* I 120.15–16; 172.14–16.

sense knowable and while she is still contained in bodies, [the soul] also appears as caretaker of the ostraceous body and, even when the object of this providence no longer exists, she desires to exercise providence on its behalf. The intellect, on the other hand, is impossible to grasp with the shape-imparting impulses of our imaginations. (Proclus, *In Remp.* I 120.22–121.3, tr. Lamberton, I underline)

The interpretative key is given from the outset. We must understand Homer's words as inspired.³⁰ He is the first to have distinguished soul *qua* soul from the intellect and the instrumental body to which the εἶδωλον is attached (I 172.9–12). According to Proclus, this passage testifies to Homer's awareness of our ability to access various levels of realities. He acknowledged the possibility for the soul, through its intellect, to remain with the divine principles or, through its image, to exercise its providential activity vis-à-vis the body. This observation allows Proclus to support why Plato, when writing the dialogues, used Homeric themes (Proclus compares Homer's *Nekyia* to those of the *Phaedo*, *Gorgias*, and *Republic*, at I 168.3–169.24). Plato grasped these principles by the same inspiration as Homer and “established these things solidly by the irrefutable methods of systematic thought,” and making them clearer for us (I 158.30–159.6).³¹ In a word, inspiration helps to remove the contradictions through a systematic reference to the higher principles that are attained by both the philosopher and the poet, whom the decree of Adrasteia places in the highest rank of incarnations. In the same way, when Proclus interprets these passages of Homer and their discussion by Plato, he also mentions the divine inspiration common to both authors.

6 Saving Homer (2): Homer Against Stesichorus

The *Phaedrus* raises an additional issue on the status of Homer, whom it seems to consider as inferior to another poet, Stesichorus. But how can the most inspired of poets be inferior to a much less famous one?

Now for those whose offense lies in telling false stories about matters divine, there is an ancient rite of purification – Homer did not know it, but Stesichorus did. When he lost his sight for speaking ill of Helen, he did not, like Homer, remain in the dark about the reason why. On the contrary, true follower of the Muses that he was, he understood it and immediately composed these lines:

There's no truth to that story (Plato, *Phdr.*, 243a4–9, tr. Nehamas & Woodruff)³²

³⁰ E.g. Proclus, *In Remp.* I 101.30–102.10; 110.7–10.

³¹ On Homer as a source for Socrates, *In Remp.* I 166.12–167.9.

³² Proclus quotes this passage in *In Remp.* I 173.11–17.

In Proclus' eyes, this passage could imply the superiority of Stesichorus, to the extent that the latter would have understood the motive of demonic anger (τὴν αἰτίαν τῶν δαιμονίων μηνιμάτων), which he appeased by his palinode. However, he recommends interpreting the difference between the two poets through the lens of inspiration. In the case of Stesichorus, blindness describes a state of insensitivity to inspiration. It is for having given a historical, sensible interpretation of the abduction of Helen that Stesichorus loses his sight, and it is thanks to the divine inspiration that it recovers it, because he has arrived at the right interpretation of the episode (I 173.26–174.4). In the case of truly inspired poets, the deprivation of a sense means allegorically its passing into a higher mode of thought. For example, the dismemberment of Orpheus means the assimilation of the poet to his divine principle (according to the model of inspiration explained above, I 174.21–175.3). Similarly, the blindness of Homer – or of Demodocos in the *Odyssey*, a character through which Homer signals that he is aware of his own inspired state – corresponds to his turning away from sensible beauties towards true beauty (I 174.5–21 and 175.3–22). By activating the intellect of the soul, inspiration blinds sense-perception, insofar as it turns the poet towards the intelligible principles and allows him to partake of the mode of thought, as the *Phaedrus* teaches us (250d). Homer's misrepresentation of Helen expresses nothing more than the poet's contempt for all the beauty of the world of becoming, and the ten years of war symbolize the duration of the souls' stay on earth, the tenth signifying their return to the world of gods (in reference to *Phaedrus* 248e). Plato therefore neither contradicts Homer nor devalues him.

Again, it is the *Phaedrus* itself that offers the solution to the problem it raises, which more broadly concerns the status of inspired poetry. But Proclus' four rules help us above all to understand the disposition in which the poet finds himself and the pedagogical objective at which he aims. They turn the interpreter away from a reading that is as obvious as it is inexact.³³ On the other hand, they are probably insufficient to provide a clear interpretation of the poet's words, as evidenced by the controversy around Stesichorus and Homer, where the same fact is interpreted in two different, even contradictory, ways. What guarantee is there then that the reader will formulate the right interpretation? Proclus' answer will consist in distinguishing different modes of theological discourse, i.e. different ways of speaking of the gods,

³³ At the very least, when Homer speaks as an inspired poet, and not as a learned or mimetic poet, since, as Proclus notes at the end of his sixth essay, Homer obviously makes use of to the three modes, *In Remp.* I 192.6–195.12. Only the lowest form of poetry is rightly banished by Plato (I 196.14–199.28).

and thus different ways of considering theological texts. With regard to the poets and their myths, the solution comes again from *Phaedrus*.

7 Coping with the Myth

In the prologue of the *Platonic Theology*, Proclus divides the dialogues according to the four theological modes he identifies in Plato, each of which he then associates with an illustrious predecessor. The first two proceed by allusion (δι' ἐνδείξεως), either in the form of symbols and myths (συμβολικῶς καὶ μυθικῶς), or by means of images (δι' εἰκόνων). The last two operate without a veil (ἀπαρακαλύπτως), one according to science (κατ' ἐπιστήμην), the other according to a divine inspiration (κατὰ τὴν ἐκ θεῶν ἐπίπνοιαν).³⁴ The division results in a manner of reading the dialogues which divides them according to the appropriate type of theological discourse:

δι' ἐνδείξεως		ἀπαρακαλύπτως	
συμβολικῶς καὶ μυθικῶς	δι' εἰκόνων	κατ' ἐπιστήμην	κατὰ τὴν ἐκ θεῶν ἐπίπνοιαν
Orpheus	Pythagoras	Plato	(Chaldean Oracles)
<i>Gorgias</i> , <i>Symposium</i> , <i>Protagoras</i>	<i>Timaeus</i> , <i>Statesman</i>	<i>Sophist</i> , <i>Parmenides</i>	<i>Phaedrus</i>

To investigate the Platonic recourse to myth and symbols, Proclus invokes two sources, the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*.³⁵ From the former, he draws a general rule of composition, the one which Plato recommends and observes in his own myths: the myth aims at education and, therefore, aims to convey “the beautiful and the good.”³⁶ The reader must therefore keep in mind that, in his myths, Plato has avoided all disagreement between the surface meaning and our natural conception of the gods (the gods cause the good alone and undergo no change). In this way he has adapted to the young audience the myths of his predecessors, by

³⁴ Proclus, *Theol. plat.* I 4, 17.9–20.25. Only the scientific mode is specific to Plato. The list should be compared to *Anon. Proleg.* 27.1–83, where the author distinguishes fifteen modes of teaching adopted by Plato.

³⁵ As shown by Fortier 2015, 229, the use of symbols is not restricted to myth, because all the theological modes use them, but with various degrees of mimesis. On σύμβολα, see Trouillard 1981 and Cardullo 1985.

³⁶ The phrase comes from *Resp.* V 462a3–4, and it is quoted by Proclus, *Theol. plat.* I 4, 21.1–22.11.

bringing order to the apparent disorder, so as to restore harmony between the true nature of the gods and the way in which they are presented.

If this rule makes it possible to understand the general purpose of Plato's myths, it is of little use in discovering the meaning behind Plato's symbols. Hence the necessity of the other source: the *Phaedrus*, the inspired dialogue *par excellence*.³⁷ This time, the rule that Proclus draws from it is hermeneutic:

But there is another which he offers in the *Phaedrus*, thinking it fit to guard the divine mythology always unmixed with natural explanations and neither to confound nor to intermix theology and physical theory. For, in effect, the divine itself transcends the whole of nature, and in this way, I suppose, it is proper for the discourses concerning the divine to be entirely free of considerations concerning nature. (*Theol. plat.* I 4, 22.11–17, tr. Fortier 2014)

Reading a myth properly demands that we keep in mind the clear distinction between the gods and nature. This does not mean that studying nature and reading (or writing) a myth are two totally incompatible activities. Myths and physics, however, refer to two levels of reality, to which correspond two modes of explanation that should not be confused. Because they speak of the gods, the myths refer to a higher level of reality than physics. This argument may seem far removed from Plato, yet it is from the *Phaedrus* that Proclus explicitly borrows it, referring to the passage where Socrates explains the removal of the nymph Oreithyia by the wind-god Boreas.

Actually, it would not be out of place for me to reject it, as our intellectuals do (σοφιζόμενος) (...). Now, *Phaedrus*, such explanations are amusing enough, but they are a job for a man I cannot envy at all. *He'd have to be far too ingenious and work too hard* (λίαν δὲ δεινοῦ ἐπιπόνου καὶ οὐ πάνυ εὐτυχοῦς ἀνδρός) – mainly because after that he will have to go on and give a rational account of the form of the Hippocentaurs, and then of the *Chimera* (Χιμαίρας); and a whole flood of *Gorgons* (Γοργόνων) and Pegasuses and other monsters, in large numbers and absurd forms, will overwhelm him. Anyone who does not believe in them, who wants to explain them away and make them plausible (κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς) by means of some sort of rough *ingenuity* (σοφία), will need a great deal of time. (...) This is why I do not concern myself with them. I accept what is generally believed, and, as I was just saying, I look not into them but into my own self: (...) am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine (θεῖα) and gentle nature? (*Phdr.* 229c4–230a6, tr. Nehamas & Woodruff; I underline the phrases quoted by Proclus)

This passage offers three different perspectives on the myths and their interpretation. To propose an allegorical explanation of all myths results from a misunderstanding of their likely surface meaning, in the sense that it amounts to considering that all mythical theophanies symbolize natural phenomena. This

³⁷ Proclus, *Theol. plat.* I 4, 17.25–18.12: Socrates, Proclus says, declares himself to be νυμφόληπτος (*Phdr.* 238d1).

kind of sophisticated explanation leads us to an endless and painstaking quest for hidden meanings, forcing us to look for a natural correspondence for each and every mythical figure. Finally, it is an obstacle to self-knowledge, insofar as it draws our attention towards objects other than ourselves (τὰ ἄλλότρια). From this point of view, myths are to be regarded as fictions of which it is useless to seek a secret or symbolic explanation. It is better to be satisfied with traditional interpretations. Proclus, however, proposes a completely different reading of these few lines:

For Plato says such a *hard-working and not altogether good man* to make natural occurrences the end of the hidden meaning of myths, and to identify both the *Chimera*, for example, and the *Gorgon* and any such mythological personages with natural forms. (...) For it is necessary, I suppose, for the mythological narratives concerning the gods to have hidden conceptions [τὰ ἀποκεκρυμμένας ἐννοίας] more venerable always than those apparent. (...) Therefore [would anyone declare] to be exegetes of the truth in these myths only those of the *interpretations*, which, in so far as they aim at the divine, immaterial, and separate hypostasis, and by looking to this, both compose and interpret the myths proper to the preconceptions in us [ἐν ἡμῖν προλήψεσιν] concerning the gods. (*Theol. plat.* I 4, 22.17–23.11, tr. Fortier 2014)

Paradoxically, Proclus considers words originally intended to distance us from mythical exegesis as an encouragement to interpret (inspired) myths in a strictly theological manner. As his classmate Hermias confirms, Socrates' criticism cannot be equivalent to an absolute rejection of myth, since he uses it himself for demonstrative purposes. It deals only with allegorical exegeses that lead to "histories (εἰς ἱστορίας), likelihoods (εἰκοτολογίας) and material causes (εἰς ὑλικὰς αἰτίας)," i.e. to physicalist and likely readings (*In Phdr.* 32.14–33.10 Lucarini & Moreschini).³⁸ This physicalist allegory is just as obvious as it is false and endless, since it focuses on realities characterized by indeterminacy. It can even be dangerous, Hermias says, insofar as the surface meaning represents something perishable, following it condemns us to a similar fate, while the hidden and enigmatic meaning raises us up to the imperishable world of true Being (*In Phdr.* 68.27–69.9).³⁹

Hermias shows perhaps better than Proclus how the hermeneutical rule proceeds to reach the hidden meaning. Far from considering the creatures evoked by Socrates (Centaurs, Gorgon, and Pegasus) as natural forces, it relates them

³⁸ Hermias stresses the same elements and quotes the same sentences as Proclus does. He also emphasizes the distinction between material and divine realities. Traditionally, the kind of interpretation rejected here by the two Neoplatonists had been practiced by the Stoics. See Brisson 1996, 64–70 (on the Stoics) and 110–112 (on Plotinus).

³⁹ Hermias refers to the ἐπιμύθιον, a term absent in Proclus which describes the head of the μῦθος, what gives it its truth (see Olympiodorus, *In Gorg.* 4 §3, 33.8; 34 §4, 176.8–9 and 49 §3, 260.7–8.).

to powers superior to the material world, which implies going beyond appearance and likelihood and rising to a level of reality impossible to convey in words because of its radical transcendence. The good exegesis of the myth is that which transcends the nature portrayed in the story and whose source lies in the Intellect that raises the soul. It is guaranteed by the fact that it expresses a truth already contained within us, and it is correct because it agrees with the preconceptions of the divine which belong to us naturally and which refer to the right notion of the gods. In these conditions, interpreting a myth is no longer a waste of time. Whereas Socrates contrasted the interpretation of divine myths with self-knowledge, Proclus and Hermias reconcile them by basing the first on an agreement with a preconception in us. Interpreting Plato's myths, and inspired myths in general, is another way of interpreting oneself, in the sense that the soul must reflect back on to the principles from which it originates.

The difficulty lies in finding out how the correspondence between the gods and their symbolic representation works. For example, concerning the myth of Oreithyia, Hermias gives three interpretations. The first, more ethical, is from a historical perspective (ἐκ τῆς ἱστορίας): the abduction of Oreithyia is an allegory for her inspiration and her possession by the god during the rite she was leading nearby the river (30.14–26). Without being incorrect, this interpretation is incomplete because it remains at the obvious level. It is limited to the ethical effects of the rite, without seeking a correspondence with divine principles. We must go beyond it, leaving history behind. Even though poets often refer to historical events, we must understand how they use them in fiction. The second interpretation is from the perspective of the universe (ἐπὶ τὰ ὅλα μεταφέρων). Oreithyia symbolizes the fertile sway of the earth under the action of divine providence, which makes her revert or proceed according to the rhythm of the seasons (30.27–31.14). This more theological interpretation reveals the divine powers hidden below the surface of history. It remains, however, exterior. Finally, the third interpretation is based on the fact that Socrates speaks to Phaedrus of a sanctuary whose ritual he wants to learn. Oreithyia symbolizes the soul that desires higher things and converts from this world to the world beyond (31.24–30). This third interpretation is the right one, not only because it analyzes Plato's myth in relation to the plot of the dialogue, but above all, because it refers to the triple criterion formulated by Hermias: to go back to the soul, to the intellect and to the gods, as philosophical life does. Note that it is perhaps as much psychological as strictly theological, which differs from the purpose of the *Platonic Theology*.

The allegorical rule from the *Phaedrus* saves myth. Proclus regularly calls upon it when he wants to reject bad readings of Plato, as he does with regard to the heaven of the *Phaedrus* palinode. Against those physical readings that identify it with our heaven, Proclus draws up a list of the absurdities in which such

an interpretation results (*Theol. plat.* IV 5, 21.6–22.8). But the rule also applies to the readings of Homer, which fill Proclus' *Commentary on the Republic*. Proclus multiplies the passages in which he rejects the physical interpretations in favour of a theological exegesis, whether it be the castration of Ouranos, the fight of Achilles and the Xanthos, or the pyre of Patroclus.⁴⁰ But the reference to the *Phaedrus* is not limited to Proclus. When Olympiodorus criticizes the historical readings of myths, he holds that Socrates denounces the readings that focus on the Minotaur (*sic*) and the apparent meaning. On the contrary, Socrates invites us to know ourselves, that is, to use our common notions to produce a truly theological and properly educational reading of myth.⁴¹ Together, the two rules drawn from the *Phaedrus*, namely that myths, by their inspired origin, 1) go back to the divine principles and 2) transcend all physical explanation, govern the exegesis and found the allegorical reading of the Neoplatonists.

8 Conclusion

The purpose of this article was not to provide a general theory of myth according to Proclus, which would require much longer analysis.⁴² It was a matter of showing how the *Phaedrus* assures the junction between myth and rational thought, reconciling not only Plato and Homer, but also different theological modes that Plato himself uses in his dialogues. If we follow Proclus, the *Phaedrus* is the inspired dialogue *par excellence*: Socrates speaks with an inspired mouth (ἐνθέω στόματι), reveals secret doctrines (ἀπόρρητα δόγματα), and is seized a divine madness, more profound than the human intelligence, which he attributes to the local gods (*Theol. plat.* I 4 17.25–18.12) – so many of the traits by which Proclus also characterizes inspired poetry. No wonder the *Phaedrus* solves the apparent disagreement between Homer and Plato. Not only does what Socrates says about inspired theology prove compatible with Homer's discourses and makes them admissible, but it illustrates Plato's own use of inspired discourse, not in the sense

⁴⁰ Proclus, *In Remp.* I 81.27–86.23 (in particular 82.20–83.7); I 148.25–149.13; I 151.24–153.20.

⁴¹ Olympiodorus, *In Gorg.* 44 §§3–7. Olympiodorus talks of the Minotaur, while Socrates says 'Hippocentaur' (229d6). We can add two passages in Philoponus, *In de an.*, 69.30–70.2 and 116.23–26, qualifying as ridiculous (καταγέλαστον) the reading limiting itself to the obvious meaning of myths. But thanks to an inspired soul (ἐνθουσιώσης ψυχῆς), one has to seek the hidden meaning. The explicit reference to Plato, without any further mention, is probably to the *Phaedrus* (229e6), where Socrates qualifies as γελοῖον the natural readings.

⁴² Elements can be found in Trouillard 1977b; Athanassiadi 2009; Sheppard 2017, 278–280.

of the philosopher's natural inspiration in any of his theological discourses or the initiate in his exposition of divinity, but the inspiration proper to the practice of myth.

The *Phaedrus* is certainly not the only source of the Neoplatonic reading of inspired poetry and this interpretation of myth. These were the fruit of a long history, at the end of which the Neoplatonists, such as Proclus, found an *a posteriori* justification in Plato's dialogues. At the very least, this dialogue offers the key to saving myths and making them consistent with Plato's philosophy, but perhaps also to founding the principle of an inspired exegesis, the ultimate key to hermeneutics.

