Plato’s Saving Mūthos:
The Language of Salvation in the Republic

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Abstract
This article discusses the Homeric background of the Republic with the aim of elucidating Plato's critique of Homeric nostos. It argues that the Republic unfolds as a nostos voyage, with Socrates striving to steer the soul home. Even though Segal has already argued for seeing the Republic as an Odyssean voyage, this article suggests that Plato does more than simply borrow the idea of a voyage as a metaphor for the wanderings of the soul. Rather, there is an implicit critique of Homer as the “poet of Becoming” in the dialogue. Thus, reading the Republic in the context of other Platonic dialogues such as the Cratylus and Theaetetus where Socrates identifies Homer as the source of the view that Ocean is the origin of all things (Crat. 402b, Theaet. 180d) and that everything is in flux (Theaet. 180d) allows us to better appreciate Socrates’ critique of poets in the Republic. At stake in this critique is ultimately the question of the soul’s true nostos, which Plato identifies with a vertical ascent (Rep. 521c, 532b) to Being rather than with a temporary homecoming within Becoming. This article contributes to the elucidation of the Homeric and pre-Socratic background of Platonic philosophy. It undertakes a literary reading of the Republic against the background of the hero’s journey motif. Specifically, it argues that Plato critiques and emends the Odyssean nostos in order to make space for Parmenidean ontology, thus forging a new understanding of salvation.

Keywords
Homer – Salvation – Nostos – Odyssey – Plato – Republic
Death will come to you from the sea, in some altogether unwarlike way, and it will end you in the ebbing time of a sleek old age. Your people about you will be prosperous. All this is true that I tell you. (Od. 11.126-137; R. Lattimore, trans.)

Introduction

Plato’s Republic concludes with the words “a myth was saved [μῦθος ἐσώθη]… and it would save us [σώσειεν]” (621b; my trans.). The primary reference of these words is the story of the soul’s afterlife journey recounted by Er in the myth of Er narrated by Socrates, but these words can also be read as referring to the dialogue as a whole. If, as Halliwell urges, we undertake a circular reading of the dialogue, then it seems that the Republic too is a kind of “saving myth.” But what kind of saving myth? In this essay, I argue that Plato presents a new saving myth that contrasts with the nostos myth of the Odyssey. Although Plato borrows idea of a voyage as a metaphor for the wanderings of the soul, he gives this idea entirely new content in that he replaces the Homeric idea of a homecoming from the sea with a new ideal, a return to Being. Via a discussion of the Odyssean structure of the Republic, I will show how Plato ultimately rejects Homer’s idea of the “refluent” or


2 For the view that there was a long tradition of interpreting the Odyssey as an allegory for the wanderings of the exiled soul, see the informative article by Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui, “Salvation for the Wanderer: Odysseus, the Gold Leaves, and Empedocles,” in Philosophy and Salvation in Greek Religion, ed. Vishwa Adluri (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 29-57.

3 Nostos, meaning a “return home,” is especially associated with the return journeys of the Achaean warriors from Troy. Besides Homer’s use of the term in the Odyssey, it also gave rise to the title of a Cyclic Epic, the Nostoi, which specifically recounts the homeward journeys of Agamemnon, Menelaus, Nestor and the other Greek heroes. The term is frequently associated with pleasant imagery, as in the expressions “the end of sweet journey home” (νόστοι τέλος γλυκεροῖο, Od. 22.323) and “honeysweet return” (νόστον . . . μελιηδέα, Od. 11.1). LSJ also lists two other meanings: “travel, journey” and “yield or produce of grain when ground.” LSJ, s.v. ‘nóstos.’ Finally, there is a third and significant meaning of nostos mentioned by Chantraine although not found in LSJ. Chantraine notes that neomai means “revenir, retourner,” but also lists an additional meaning: “le sens serait ‘sauver,’” which he then links to Sanskrit nāasate and nāasatya. In Sanskrit, the primary meanings are “to associate oneself with, to join, embrace.” The Nāsatya are the Aśvins or the Dioscuri who play

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Plato often uses nautical motifs. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates famously refers to his method of inquiry as a “second sailing” (τὸν δεύτερον πλοῦν, 99d). This is by no means the only reference to a Socratic voyage in the *Phaedo*. The entire dialogue is framed by two voyages, the Athenian embassy to Delos and the event it commemorates, Theseus’ return from Crete.4 The *Crito*, another dialogue that takes place on the eve of Socrates’ execution, also invokes a voyage: Socrates narrates that a woman dressed in white approached him in a dream and said, “Socrates, may you arrive at fertile Phthia on the third day” (44b).5 The quotation about Phthia is taken from the ninth book of the *Iliad* (363); in its Platonic context this image could easily be seen as implying “a homeward journey, a return to one’s permanent abode.”6

In the *Republic*, Socrates links the condition of the soul to the sea-god Glaucus (611c-612a); the soul is currently sunk in a sea of evils, but if it were lifted out of this sea, it would realize that it is actually something divine (611e; cf. *Theaet.* 176a-b). At the conclusion of the dialogue, he refers to how souls might cross the River of Forgetfulness and not be defiled (621b). Rather than being an obvious metaphor for the soul’s afterlife journey, these references to the sea appear to be programmatic.7 Plato also intersperses references to

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4 The entire dialogue appears to be consciously invoking Theseus’ voyage because, like Theseus, Socrates is shown with fourteen companions and just as Theseus had to lead them out of the labyrinth of the Minotaur, Socrates must lead his companions out of the labyrinth of death in the argument for the immortality of the soul.

5 All translations of Plato are from J. M. C. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997) unless otherwise noted.


7 Segal and Howard both attribute a direct reference to Homer to Plato. I follow their work here, although there is some merit to the argument, raised by a reviewer, that the use of the language of navigation in the context of salvation is by itself not enough to establish the Homeric context of the *Republic*, since the sea was perceived as a constant danger in Greek culture. For this reason, I distinguish between generic nautical references (for example, the
navigation or, more directly, to the *Odyssey* throughout the dialogue. Let us look at some of these in context.

The *Republic* begins with Socrates and Glaucon descending to the Piraeus, the harbor of Athens (327c). At 346a8, Socrates refers to the art of navigation (κυβερνητική), responsible for “safety while sailing” (κυβερνητικὴ δὲ σωτηρίαν ἐν τῷ πλεῖν, 346d). Socrates introduces the metaphor of a wave (κῦμα) at 456b, saying they have “escaped one wave of criticism in [their] discussion of the law about women” and “haven’t been altogether swept away by laying it down that male and female guardians must share their entire way of life.…” When Glaucon says “it’s certainly no small wave that you’ve escaped” (456c), Socrates responds, “you won’t think that it’s so big when you get a look at the next one” (ibid.). The third wave, which Socrates calls the “the biggest and most difficult one” (472a), concerns the Socratic belief that philosophers must become kings (473c-d). Book 5 of the *Republic* is thus structured according to three waves of objection: the first at 456b concerning the equality of men and women, the second at 456c-d the possession in common of women and children, and the third at 472a the establishment of the rule of the philosopher-king. Socrates also invokes the nautical metaphor at 488a-489a as part of his thematic investigation of the status of the philosopher in the city. The city is likened to a ship, the ruling class to the captain of the ship, and the citizenry to the crew.

Segal suggests that the “elaborate metaphor of the great ‘triple wave’ in book 4, resumed in book 10, … enables us to envisage the work as a kind of Odyssey of the λόγος as well as of the soul, ‘steering’ (the recurrent κυβερνᾶν) a precarious course through the dangerous seas.” He also notes a number of parallels between the homecoming of Odysseus and the language of the soul’s travails in the *Republic*, with the latter used in the dialogue to frame a concern with true Being.

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metaphor of the “triple wave” or of the “ship’s captain”) from specific references to salvation from the sea (Arion’s story) and both again from explicitly Homeric references. However, when taken as a whole, and especially in light of the ontological critique of Homeric philosophy in Plato’s dialogues, there is good reason to think that Plato’s use of nautical imagery is not accidental: it is suggested by the very topic of a critique of Homer.

8 The three waves are deliberate attempts to problematize the idea of safety at sea and we should therefore be skeptical of easy resolutions to the three objections. Segal is also right to point out that the metaphor of the triple wave is resumed in Book 10: the triple wave remains a threat to the argument as long as it remains at the level of the nautical metaphor and it is only once the soul begins lifting out of the water in the myth of Glaucus in Book 10 that this danger is overcome.
Seeking to ascend, the soul may yet be dragged down by the ‘barbaric mud’ (βόρβορος βαρβαρικός, 7, 533d). Defiled or ‘stained’ by the impurities of this world, it needs to be ‘cleansed’ and to be seen in its ‘purity’ (cf. 7, 527d; 9, 585b; 586c; 10, 611c). Asleep or lost in the unreal ‘dream’ of Becoming, the soul must be ‘awakened’ to the light and reality of Being (7, 534c)…. Behind them [that is, these metaphors] stands the archetypal mythology of passage between worlds, archaic man’s fundamental myth of identity, of his soul in time. The power of this mythology to make comprehensible the spiritual journeys of human life has its roots in Homer: Odysseus cleansing himself of the brine on Scheria after his deadly struggle with the sea or the movement between deathlike sleep and waking that brings him finally home to Ithaca in Odyssey v. 9

Although sympathetic to Segal’s suggestion, I believe more could be said of Plato’s relationship to Homer. For instance, there are several literary evocations of the Odyssey throughout the Republic:

(1) Glaucon dismisses the first city in speech as a “city for pigs” (372d) recalling Circe’s enchantment of Odysseus’ crew (Od. 10.253-268).

(2) Socrates compares the condition of the unjust soul to monsters such as the Chimera, Scylla or Cerberus at 588c (Od. 12.94-11, 266-279).

(3) In the Republic’s concluding myth, Er recounts that as the spindle holding together the whorls of the cosmos turned, a Siren stood on each of the rims of the circles and sang “one single note” (617b). “The concord of the eight notes produced a single harmony” (ibid.). Er further describes how the three daughters of Necessity, the three Fates, were seated on thrones at an equal distance and sang to the music of the Sirens. “Lachesis sang of the past, Clotho of the present, and Atropos of the future” (617c). Suggestive of a cosmos that is united both spatiotemporally and harmonically, Socrates’ description here has the function of evoking the cosmos as brilliant in its unitary organization, a whole arranged according to number and its spatiotemporal and sensory or auditory expression (that is, motion and harmony). The reference to Sirens recalls the Odyssey where Odysseus has himself bound to the mast of his ship so that he can hear and yet resist the Sirens’ song (Od. 12.194-213). 10 In the myth, Er alone is able to resist the fatal pull of the brilliant harmonious cosmos: whereas

9 Segal, “The Myth was Saved,” 333-34.
10 The Sirens sing of the fall of Troy, suggesting that Homer was not unaware of the dangers of poetic immortality; for a recent discussion of the tension between achieving kleos
the other souls eagerly choose new lives at the lot of lives, Er is a non-participant in reincarnation. He is thus able “to listen and look [ἀκούειν τε καὶ θεᾶσθαι] at everything in that place” and “be a messenger to human beings” (614d) as commanded.

Finally, there is one more reference to the nautical metaphor in the myth of the sea-god Glaucus at Republic 612a. Comparing the soul in its present condition to the composite, barnacle-encrusted god, Socrates says:

We must realize what it [that is the soul] grasps and longs to have intercourse with, because it is akin to the divine and immortal and what always is, and we must realize what it would become if it followed this longing with its whole being, and if the resulting effort lifted it out of the sea in which it now dwells, and if the many stones and shells (those which have grown all over it in a wild, earthy, and stony profusion because it feasts at those so-called happy feastings on earth) were hammered off it. Then we’d see what its true nature is and be able to determine whether it has many parts or just one [εἴτε πολυειδὴς εἴτε μονοειδής] and whether or in what manner it is put together. (612a)

The Glaucus narrative initiates a turn to the Republic’s concluding soteriological myth of Er, which Socrates prefaces with the words: “[it] isn’t, however, a tale of Alcinous [Ἀλκίνου] that I’ll tell you but of a brave [ἀλκίμου] Pamphylian man called Er…” (614b). Until Book 10, Plato constantly plays upon the language of sea-faring and of voyaging. However, starting with the Glaucus narrative there is a sudden shift.11 Unlike the Homeric nostos of Odysseus, which ends with Odysseus returning to the sea,12 Plato now prepares to leave the sea

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11 Book 10 of the Republic, is divided into two parts: an “art-critic” section from 595a-608b and a “warrior” section from 614-b621d. Between these two sections, we have two crucial transitory passages: the proof of the soul’s immortality (608c-611b) and the purificatory passage of the Glaucus narrative (611b-614b). The itinerant aspects of the long journey in the “sea of argument” now turns to the soul, which in turn prepares the way for an appreciation of the theoretical viewing described in the myth of Er. Neither the reference to a sea-god at this crucial stage of the argument nor to the need for the soul to rise up out of the sea in which it is now sunk can be accidental.

12 For references to Odysseus’ “day of return” (νόστιμον ἦμαρ), see Od. 1.9; the actual return can be found at 12.127-140; considered as a narrative of return, of course, Odysseus’ nostos ends with his narration to Alcinous. For a discussion of Odysseus’s various other nostoi
behind altogether as he traces the ascent of the philosophically purified soul. The Republic explicitly invokes a comparison with the Odyssey at this point: Socrates’ reference to the “so-called happy feastings on earth” recalls Alcinous’ feast at which Odysseus recounts the story of his voyage in a flashback. But the feast is anything but happy. The king’s bard Demodocus recounts the story of the capture of Troy and Odysseus weeps piteously as he hears the story. The Republic too began with a “feast” of sorts; at the end of Book 1, Thrasymachus retorts to Socrates: “Let that be your banquet, Socrates, at the feast of Bendis” (354a; cf. also 352b). If we see the entire dialogue as framed by a “feast of words” (352b), the Glaucus passage signals an end to the voyage of the Republic, that is, the section where Socrates, like Odysseus, travels through many cities (πολλῶν ἀνθρώπων ἱδεις ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω, Od. 1.3).

There is thus clear evidence for the Homeric context of the Republic. Indeed, Segal thinks that the dialogue is framed by Homeric themes, both at its beginning in Book 1 and at its end in Book 10. However, the evidence for a “Homeric framing” of the Republic is even stronger if we consider the reference to Homer at the outset of the myth of Er. Socrates prefaces the myth with a pun: it is no longer a tale of Alcinous or “heavy mind” that he is going to narrate but the story of the philosophically purified, uplifted soul of the brave warrior (alkimou) Er. If we see the Odyssey as divided into two sections, an alkinou apologon in Books 9-12 followed by the properly “homecoming” section of the nostos in Books 13-24 in which Odysseus is more of a warrior and a brave hero, that is, an alkimou andros, then with this pun Plato is finally preparing to leave his


Socrates characteristically describes this turn as a turn from the composite (πολυειδής) to the simple (μονοειδής). Πολύτροπος (“much-travelled,” “much-wandering”) is a frequent epithet of Odysseus (cf. Od. 1.1, 10.330); Plato at Statesman 291b uses πολυτρόποις in the sense of “cunning” and in Lesser Hippias uses the word in this sense as applying to Odysseus (364e). In the Phaedo, μονοειδεῖ and πολυειδεῖ are epithets of the soul and the body respectively (80b).

These are the various cities constructed in speech (see Rep. 369a and c).

“At the beginning of the Republic Cephalus, himself ‘far along on the road of life’ (I, 328e) welcomes Socrates with a Homeric echo which recalls the god’s arrival on Olympus or his appearance at the zero-point of Odysseus’ suspension from the human world (ὡς ἐν θεοῦ ξύλῳ, I, 328c; cf. Σ 386, 425; Od. ε 88). In Plato the ensuing phrase, ‘descent to the Piraeus’, recalling the opening words of the dialogue, suggests that we too are at the Odyssean beginning of a long and arduous passage between illusion and reality rather than established on Olympian heights. The journey which we will have ‘traversed’, or ‘recounted’—a play on the double sense of διεληλύθαμεν in the Republic’s closing words—will have embraced not nine years but ‘a thousand-year passage’, of souls, not of war-torn heroes (10, 621d).” Segal, “The Myth was Saved,” 334.
Homeric prototype behind. Nonetheless, and perhaps as though to underscore that the dialogue with Homer continues even as he leaves his model of salvation behind, the Homeric allusions continue even in this concluding section. The dialogue concludes with a descent to Hades recalling Odysseus’ descent in Book 11 of the Odyssey, while the myth of Er concludes with a direct allusion to the fate of three Homeric heroes—Ajax, Agamemnon, and Odysseus. Odysseus is the last among all the souls to make a choice and Plato dwells especially on his choice, which is both reasoned and deliberate. Odysseus’ choice assumes special significance, since his soul is the only one that is happy with its choice and explicitly affirms that it would have made the same choice even if it had been the first (620b).

Arion’s Leap: Salvation from the Sea

In Book 5, Plato crosses Homer’s narrative voyage with another story, taken this time from Herodotus, of a journey at sea: Arion’s leap. The story of Arion’s leap complicates the Homeric conception of a safe homecoming. Crucially, it introduces the theme of divine salvation into the Republic. Although Herodotean rather than Homeric, the story of Arion’s leap is closely related to the theme of salvation from the sea.

Herodotus recounts the story of Arion’s rescue in Histories 1.23-24. Arion was a lyre-player and inventor of the dithyramb. Returning from Tarentum in Italy, he hired a Corinthian ship to take him back to Corinth but the crew plotted to take his money and cast him overboard. Arion begs them to take his money instead of his life, but they refuse. Finally, they offer him a choice between killing himself and so receiving a burial on land or leaping overboard. Arion then asks for permission to wear his regalia and sing one last time, after which he promises to cast himself off from the ship. Pleased at the prospect of hearing the famous singer, the sailors accede to his request. After singing one last time, Arion cast himself off from the deck; according to the legend, a dolphin rescued him and carried him on his back to Taenarum whence he made his way to Corinth. Arion narrates the story to Periander, king of Corinth, who is initially skeptical of the wonder. The sailors arrive and claim that Arion remained behind in Italy, but, once he shows himself, are forced to admit their

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16 It is interesting to speculate that just as we hear of Odysseus’ voyage as a flashback recounted by him, the Republic is also meant to be read backward from its end, that is, from the comment “a myth was saved and not destroyed.” Plato is borrowing at more levels than one from Homer.
guilt. Herodotus recounts that there is a small bronze memorial of a man riding a dolphin to Arion at Taenarum.

Plato invokes the myth at 453d: Socrates says that “whether someone falls into a small diving pool or into the middle of the biggest ocean, he must swim all the same” and, when Glaucon concurs, resumes: “then we must swim too, and try to save ourselves [σῴζεσθαι] from the sea of argument [πέλαγος...τοῦ λόγου], hoping that a dolphin will pick us up or that we’ll be rescued by some other desperate means [σωτηρίαν]” (453d).

Walter Burkert identifies the Arion myth with the cult of Dionysus, noting that the “introduction of Dionysiac choral songs cannot be separated from the emergence of Dionysiac motifs, of the thiasoi of padded dancers on Corinthian pottery starting precisely at the time of Periander.” He also claims that “the association of Dionysiac dances and dolphin is...attested virtually within Arion’s lifetime.” These associations are strengthened in the Homeric Hymn which “makes the hero the god Dionysus himself. He is seized by Tyrrhenian pirates who want to enchain him while at sea. But the chains fall off, vines start to sprout and wind around the mast and sail, and the mast is covered with ivy. The sailors leap into the sea and are transformed into dolphins. Only the pilot is spared by the god, for he alone had spoken against the pirates; indeed, the god makes him ‘entirely happy’ by putting him in the god’s own service.” In contrast, Flory underlines Arion’s associations with Apollo: “since the Arion story and its monument are transitions between the stories of Thrasyboulos and Periander (1.19-20), and Periander overhears Thrasyboulos’ questioning of the oracle at Delphi, Hdt.’s mind is at this point on Apollo’s sanctuary. The orthian nome was sung in honor of Apollo.... There was (later at least) a statue of a dolphin at Delphi and a dolphin rescue story (Paus. 10.13.10). Poseidon had ceded his rights to Delphi in return for Tainarum (Paus. 2.33.3, 10.5.6...). Apollo appears as a dolphin in Hymn. Hom. Ap. 493-96 and Dionysus, who also held sway at Delphi..., changes pirates into dolphins in Hymn. Hom. Bacch.—hence a possible folk-etymology for ‘Delphi’.” More recently, Gray, following C. M. Bowra, has argued that Poseidon is the deity responsible for saving Arion.

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18 Ibid., 200.
19 Ibid.
22 “An orthios nomos such as the one Arion performs could honor Apollo, because he is the patron of the kithara that is used to accompany it. But the principal god of the open sea
Whatever the exact identity of the deity responsible for Arion’s rescue (and we should not rule out that different traditions may have attributed the miraculous rescue to different deities), it is significant that Socrates appeals to a story of divine salvation at a crucial stage of the dialogue.²³ There are also interesting resonances between this story and the dialogue of the Republic. For instance, Arion’s musical gifts play a significant role in the narrative. Herodotus begins his narration with the words: “This Arion was a lyre-player second to none in that age; he was the first man whom we know to compose and name the dithyramb which he afterwards taught at Corinth.”²⁴ He also narrates that Arion travelled to Italy and Sicily where he made a lot of money (presumably through his music, although Herodotus does not say so) and even the pirates anticipate listening to the great singer with pleasure (ἀκούσεσθαι τοῦ ἀρίστου ἀνθρώπων ἀοιδοῦ, 24.5). Although Herodotus describes Arion’s request and performance in detail, the highpoint of the narrative, his leap, elicits only a brief ῥῖψαί μιν ἐς τὴν θάλασσαν ἑωυτὸν (24.5). Arion’s ὄρθιος νόμος is, of course, instrumental in saving him, whether one attributes his rescue to a divine force or the dolphin’s proverbial love of music. Arion’s myth is thus structured as a “saving” myth, which encloses a “saving” song. If we read the Republic as a whole as a “saving myth” as suggested by Halliwell,²⁵ then there is also a structural parallel between the two narratives, since the Republic, too, encloses a “saving” song in Book 7.²⁶ Following a discussion of harmonic motions at 530e-531c, Socrates says to Glaucon that “all these subjects are merely preludes to the song itself that must also be learned” (531d), namely, “the song that dialectic sings” (532a; my italics).²⁷ Socrates describes the song thus:

(πέλαγος, 1.23.2) into which Arion jumped was Poseidon, and Arion might more naturally have had this god in mind. It is entirely appropriate that Arion, who began his journey at Taras, a place named for the son of Poseidon, should then land at Poseidon’s sanctuary at Taenarum. As Poseidon’s agent, the dolphin would naturally bring him to this sanctuary, and Arion followed the usual procedures of the Greeks in his dedication, thanking Poseidon for salvation from the sea.” Vivienne Gray, “Herodotus’ Literary and Historical Method,” The American Journal of Philology 122,1 (2001): 14.

²³ The Arion myth divides the book almost exactly in half.
²⁶ I do not mean to suggest that this song in the Republic has anything in common with Arion’s song; the argument here is structural and not concerned with the content of either song.
²⁷ That we are meant to take this metaphor quite seriously can be seen from a passage in the Theaetetus. Socrates contrasts the shrewd non-philosophic person with the philosopher
It is intelligible, but it is imitated by the power of sight. We said that sight tries at last to look at the animals themselves, the stars themselves, and, in the end, at the sun itself. In the same way, whenever someone tries through argument and apart from all sense perceptions to find the being itself of each thing and doesn't give up until he grasps the good itself with understanding itself, he reaches the end of the intelligible, just as the other reached the end of the visible. (532a-b)

Following Socrates’ description of the dialectical journey at 532b-d as a “release from bonds and the turning around from shadows to statues and the light of the fire and, then, the way up out of the cave to the sunlight . . . ,” Glaucon responds:

Let’s assume that what you’ve said is so and turn to the song itself, discussing it in the same way as we did the prelude. So tell us: what is the sort of power dialectic has, what forms is it divided into, and what paths does it follow? For these lead, it seems, towards that place which is a rest from the road, so to speak, and an end of journeying for the one who reaches it. (532d-e)

Although we might pursue these parallels further,28 my main interest is in the structural similarities between the myth of Arion and the Republic. The sudden appearance of a “song” in Book 7 takes on added significance in light of the Arion myth. Turning to the Arion myth, moreover, allows us to clarify two types of song in the Republic: one the saving song that dialectic sings, which leads to the ontological pedagogy of the Republic; the other the Sirens’ song, which draws the souls into the cosmos and thus to their peril.

The Republic is also evocative of the story of Arion in other ways. Both Gray and Flory read the Arion myth as a story of self-sacrifice. Contrasting Arion’s self-sacrifice with another sacrifice in which the Persians leap overboard in

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28 The “song within a song” structure has a direct precedent in the Odyssey: Frangoulidis argues that Polyphemus’ prayer to Poseidon “can be seen as a doublet of Homer who appears to the Muse to sing for him the hero’s troubles that result from the fulfillment of the giant’s prayer to Poseidon, since prayer is a form [of] poetry par excellence.” Stavros A. Frangoulidis, “Polyphemus’ Prayer to Poseidon: Hom. Od. 9.528-535,” Quaderni Uribinati di Cultura Classica, n.s., 43.1 (1993): 48.
order to secure their king’s salvation in a storm (8.118), Gray writes: “Arion trusts in divine power to save him, and he is vindicated. He has no chance of surviving if he stays on board the ship; in the sea, he has some. He throws himself into the sea as others throw in their more concrete dedications, hoping that his life will be returned to him.” Flory suggests that the myth’s central emphasis is upon courage or a “brave gesture . . . which demonstrates contempt for danger.” Comparing the myth to the story of the Spartans combing their hair prior to a deadly combat, he writes: “Herodotus shows how Arion and the others, by proceeding calmly and in good spirits, almost as if nothing were wrong, make death seem a natural extension of their lives.” “Just as it is appropriate for the soldier to go down fighting as he has been trained to do, it is fitting also—and dignified and equally as brave—for the singer to go down singing.” If we turn to Socrates’ description of the philosopher-guardians of the ideal city, we see that the same structures apply here. Courage and spiritedness are defining characteristics of the warrior in Book 2 (375a-b). In Book 3, Socrates censures certain types of poetry for engendering a fear of death (386b-c); the true warrior is “unafraid of death, preferring it [even] to defeat in battle or slavery” (386b). Although Socrates recommends physical training for the body (376e, 403c, 404b), excessive care of the body is discouraged (407b-c). He describes the ideal warriors as “sleepless hounds, able to see and hear as keenly as possible and to endure frequent changes of water and food, as well as summer and winter weather on their campaigns, without faltering in health” (404a-b). He bans all licentiousness and excess (404b-d) and underscores the

31 Ibid., 417.
32 Ibid., 419.
33 Vernant’s researches, too, suggest that Socratic philosophical practice was closer to a physical and spiritual discipline than rational positivism: “In the warrior societies of Greece these tests presented an early educational system to select the young according to their aptitude for the exercise of power. However, the philosophical mélețe is distinguished by the fact that it substitutes in the place of ritual observances and military exercises a truly intellectual education, a mental schooling in which the emphasis is laid above all, as in the case of poetic mélețe, upon training for memory. The philosophical mélețe is a virile virtue, and like the warrior mélețe, it involves tense concentration, constant attention, epiméleia, and hardwork, ponos. In the traditional version of the arete which is reflected in the myth of Heracles at the crossroads of vice and virtue, it is set in opposition to relaxation and lack of training, amélia and amélétèsia, to laziness, argia, softness, malachia, and pleasure, hédoné. But in the case of philosophical mélețe the exercises and training concern the soul and the intelligence, not the body. To be more specific, and to
necessity of self-control for the philosopher (431a-432b). The true philosopher is distinguished from the “lovers of sights” at 475d-476c. But perhaps the clearest parallel to the Arion story is found in the Republic’s concluding myth where the warrior Er dies on the battlefield but is then resurrected and fulfills the telos of the philosopher.\footnote{See Phaid. 64a: “The one aim of those who practice philosophy in the right way is to practice for dying and death”; 65a: “The philosopher more than other men frees the soul from the association with the body as much as possible”; 65a: “a man finds no pleasure in such things and has no part in them is thought by the majority not to deserve to live and to be close to death; the man, that is, who does not care for the pleasures of the body”; 65c-d: “the soul of the philosopher… disdains the body, flees from it, and seeks to be by itself.” The philosopher does not fear death because it is nothing but that “freedom and separation of the soul from the body” (67d) which he has sought all his life.}

A third point of resemblance concerns the placement of both tales. In the Histories, the story of Arion is inserted between two accounts of war: Alyattes’ war with the Milesians, which directly frames the story, and Croesus’ war with the Ephesians (beginning with Histories 1.26). Although Flory considers the myth “a digression within a digression,”\footnote{Flory, “Arion’s Leap,” 411.} matters are not quite so simple. The Arion myth occurs as part of the Lydian cycle, which recounts the rise and fall of the house of Gyges. The cycle begins with Gyges overthrowing Candaules, the ruler of Lydia, and establishing his own line in Book 2 and ends with the downfall of Croesus in Book 9. As John Lenz and I have argued in a recent article, the Republic also has a similar structure: in book 2, Glauccon recounts the myth of Gyges’ ancestor and this myth structures the remaining books of the dialogue through to Book 9.\footnote{Vishwa Adluri and John Lenz, “From Politics to Salvation through Philosophy: Herodotus’ Histories and Plato’s Republic,” in Philosophy and Salvation in Greek Religion, ed. Vishwa Adluri (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 217-41.} In Book 10, Socrates finally overturns the burden of the Gyges myth, saying to Glauccon: “And haven’t we cleared away the various other objections to our argument without having to invoke the rewards and reputations of justice, as you said Homer and Hesiod did? And haven’t we found that justice itself is the best thing for the soul itself, and that the soul—whether it has the ring of Gyges or even it together with the cap of Hades—should do just things?” (612a-b) With the overturning of the Gyges narrative, Socrates is finally able to give an account of philosophical piety in the myth of Er.
He describes the story of a dead warrior who miraculously revived just as he was laid on his pyre. In Herodotus as well, Croesus, the last king of the line of Gyges, finds himself on a pyre and is about to be immolated when Apollo intervenes to save him. Both Herodotus’ Histories and Plato’s Republic evidence a belief in a cyclical logic of Becoming that manifests as justice. J. T. Hooker, for example, asserts that in Herodotus’ history, “the cyclical pattern (κύκλος) discernible in human affairs can be understood only by acknowledging the cooperation of an obscure destiny (τὸ πεπρωμένον) and an all-too-human divinity, intent (for instance) on bringing Croesus to ruin but quick to save him in his extremity (1.86-7).”

If we follow Hooker in seeing the Arion myth as emblematic of Herodotus’ belief in the cyclical pattern (κύκλος) of human affairs, then we can see the myth as already anticipating Socrates’ cosmology in the myth of Er. Socrates’ implicit reference to the Arion myth could thus be read as signaling the upcoming fall of the house of Gyges in Book 9 of Herodotus’ Histories. The main argument of the Republic began with an expulsion of necessity: Glaucon and Adeimantus argued in Book 2 that the seemingly just man could perform unjust action without suffering the consequences. In Book 10, however, Socrates demonstrates to the young sons of Ariston that the unjust individual eventually pays the price of his misdeeds (613b-c). Indeed, in the myth of Er, the entire cosmos is seen to turn around the “spindle of Necessity” (Ἀνάγκης ἄτρακτον, 616c). Thus, the concluding myth reinstates both the role of Necessity and Fate (the three Fates, daughters of Necessity are mentioned at 617b and passim). Once Necessity is enthroned center-stage in the cosmos in the myth of Er, it becomes clear that every act of injustice must be expiated.

Socrates’ reference to Arion in Book 5, though brief, holds many clues to the Republic’s philosophical and soteriological project. The reference to rescue by a dolphin in Arion’s myth brings together the language of seafaring, a pervasive theme in the Republic as we have seen, with issues of piety, heroism, and sacrifice. Further, it problematizes the idea of safety at sea through introducing a community of sailors who attempt to hijack the ship and kill Arion, a motif that is also recalled in the simile of the ship’s captain in the next book. Arion’s journey is a nostos voyage (he was on his way home to Corinth). The interplay

between these two voyages, a Homeric nostos voyage and a Herodotean soteriological voyage, create a peculiar tension in Plato’s Republic between two conceptions of salvation: one within Becoming, the other through Being; one exoteric and dependent upon the community, the other esoteric and oriented at the individual soul. Let us see how Socrates resolves this paradox of nostos and sōtēria in the myth of Er in Book 10 of the Republic.

The Language of Salvation in the Republic

A word study of σωτηρία and related terms such as σωτήρ and σώζειν in the Republic demonstrates just how central this theme is to the dialogue. The first occurrence of the term σωτηρία (346 a8) introduces two metaphors, that of health and navigation. Socrates says that each art produces its specific benefit (ὠφελίαν), the art of medicine (ἰατρική) health (ὑγίειαν), the art of navigation (κυβερνητική) safety at sea (σωτηρίαν ἐν τῷ πλεῖν). The nautical metaphor recurs in a passage containing both the terms σώζεσθαι and σωτηρίαν (453 d11), in which Socrates invokes Herodotus’ story of Arion’s rescue from drowning (Histories I.23-4). Socrates says that he and his interlocutors too must try to escape (σῴζεσθαι) out of a sea of argument and hope that a dolphin provides rescue (σωτηρίαν). The concluding passage of the Republic once again invokes the metaphor of a “good crossing”, but the emphasis now shifts from political or physical salvation to saving the soul.

Other passages (425e 3 and 433c8) seem to link salvation to the city’s constitution, but never to individual citizens. However, even here Socrates invokes either the gods or a guiding noetic principle in the preservation of the laws. Although we cannot make the stronger case that the word σωτηρία exclusively refers to saving the individual, the weaker point that σωτηρία and related terms have a wider application than just to the city should be noted. Three terms (σωτηρίαν also σώσει, διασῴζεσθαι) occur at 429 c5, 6, 9, and refer to the preservation of one’s discrimination between what is to be feared and what not.

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39 I gratefully acknowledge Matt Newman’s assistance in compiling this word study. A version of this study appeared previously in the introduction to Philosophy and Salvation in Greek Religion (Vishwa Adluri, “Philosophy, Salvation, and the Mortal Condition,” in Philosophy and Salvation in Greek Religion, ed. Vishwa Adluri [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013], 1-27).

40 For the importance of the metaphor of sailing as a key to Socrates’ entire philosophical approach, see Seth Benardete, Socrates’ Second Sailing: On Plato’s Republic (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
both in desire and in pain; this preservation is in the soul (ἐν ἐπιθυμίαις). 430b2 again refers to σωτηρίαν as a power (δύναμιν) in the soul as to what is to be feared and not feared. 433b10 refers to justice as a quality that brings about and ensures the preservation (σωτηρίαν) of the remaining virtues of soberness, courage, and intelligence. At 463b1, the rulers of the democratic city are said to be σωτῆρας and ἐπικούρους (saviors and helpers). Although this appears to link salvation to politics, this statement must be seen against the background of the foregoing discussion of the virtues. Again, at 465d8, those who ensure the salvation of the state (τῆς πόλεως σωτηρίαν) are ensured honors and a worthy burial, but these rites that do not play a role in Er’s death. This suggests that “political salvation” is superseded in the final myth of Er. At 549 b7 it becomes explicit that what truly preserves is reason (λόγος); Socrates says that a certain kind of λόγος itself is the φύλαξ and furthermore, that “is the only indwelling preserver (σωτήρ) of virtue throughout life in the soul that possesses it.”

Socrates brings the Republic to a close with the words: “And so, Glaucon, a myth was saved (μῦθος ἐσώθη) and not destroyed, and it would save us (σώσειεν), if we were persuaded by it, for we would then make a good crossing of the River of Unheeding, and our souls wouldn’t be defiled” (621b-c; my translation). Once again, the language of salvation occurs together with the metaphor of crossing or navigating a body of water, though now this image is linked specifically to not drinking from the River of Unheeding (cf. 621a). This passage should be read in conjunction with Socrates’ words at 618b-619b, where we are given a definition of what it means to be “saved”: salvation is understood both as avoiding the greatest danger of all for a human (ὁ πᾶς κίνδυνος ἀνθρώπῳ, καὶ διὰ ταῦτα μάλιστα, 618b) and as attaining the greatest happiness (εὐδαιμονέστατος γίγνεται, 619b).

**Plato’s Critique of Homer: Republic 10 and Theaetetus**

Having looked at Plato’s use of Odyssean motifs, his use of the Arion narrative to complicate the Homeric notion of homecoming from the sea, and his use of the language of salvation, let us now turn to Plato’s critique of Homer. I will

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41 Namely, λόγος blended with culture (μουσικῇ).
42 Cf. Phaid. 107c, 114d, Gorg. 526e, Eurip. Medea 235 ἄγων μέγιστος, Thucyd. i.32.5 μέγας ὁ κίνδυνος, Aristoph. Clouds 955 νῦν γάρ ἅπας ὁ κίνδυνος ἄνειται, Frogs 882 ἄγων . . . ὁ μέγας, Antiphon v. 43έν ὁ μοι ὁ πᾶς κίνδυνος ἦν. For the expression cf. Gorg. 479ε ἐν τούτω ἡ πάσα εὐδαιμονία ἔστιν.
focus here specifically on his dramatic and ontologic critique, as articulated in *Republic* and *Theaetetus*.

**The Republic**

In spite of all the attention devoted to Plato’s critique of the poets in the *Republic*, one aspect of this critique remains to be clarified: his criticism of Homeric soteriology. From Plato’s perspective, this soteriology, which is based upon the ideal of poetic immortality, must be overcome if he is to articulate an alternative understanding of salvation, namely the noetic salvation possible through philosophy. This criticism underlies his more general critique of Homer as poet.

The narrative of the *Odyssey* occupies about a month, although Odysseus’ actual journeying, related primarily through a flashback, takes much longer. As the story opens, the council of the gods has decreed that Odysseus must leave Calypso for his home, Ithaca. Odysseus sets forth and arrives next in Scheria, where he encounters the Phaecians (Books 1-8). Alcinous, their king, hosts a banquet, at which he asks Odysseus to tell him his true name and his story. Odysseus then relates the story of his voyage since leaving Troy and of his encounters with the Cicones, the Lotus Eaters, Cyclops, Aeolus, Laistrygones, Circe the witch, Tiresias, Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, and, finally, Helios (Books 9-12). These events cover a timespan of two years, following which Odysseus spends another seven years with Calypso. Thus, his narration to king Alcinous recounts almost nine years of travel. Following the encounter with Alcinous, Odysseus finally sets sail for home. Arriving at Ithaca, he slays Penelope’s suitors and is reunited with Penelope and his son Telemachus (Books 13-24). We can thus divide Odysseus’ narrative into two parts: Books 9-12

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43 What do I mean by “noetic salvation”? The salvation I have in mind is precisely the life of the philosopher as presented in Plato’s *Phaedo*; it is the life of theoretical contemplation, which even while in the body, strives to separate the soul as much as possible from the body. Many have interpreted the claim about a form of salvation in Plato as implying a state of afterlife beatitude, possibly discarnate but definitely not of this world. Such a reading not only anachronistically projects a Christian notion of heaven onto Plato (or rather a vulgar interpretation of the Christian notion, which itself is far more sophisticated and much closer to Plato—for instance, in the writings of Augustine), but it then also leads to pseudo-problems such as the objection that, for Plato too the philosopher must live in Becoming. But this can only be an objection if one assumes that the salvation implied here is a metaphysical salvation.

relate the “wandering” portion of the nostos narrative; this is the tale told to Alcinous (alkinou apologist). Books 13-24 relate the properly “homecoming” portion of the nostos, in the sense that Odysseus returns to the safety of Ithaca. In this portion, Odysseus is more of a warrior and a brave hero: he is an alkimou andros.

Comparing this outline of the Odyssey to Plato’s Republic, we can discern a rough similarity between the two narratives. The longest section of the dialogue, that is, Books 2-9, dealing with the construction and decline of the ideal city, begins with an expulsion: in the first half of Book 2, Socrates describes a simple city, built upon the principle that each person should perform a single task (369b-372d). The city is small, the desires of its citizens moderate and, consequently, it has no need to go to war. This city, however, does not satisfy Glaucon who at 372d disdainfully interjects: “If you were founding a city for pigs, Socrates . . . wouldn’t you feed them on the same diet?” With these words, Glaucon oversteps the bounds of the moderate city. Thereafter, his excessive desire drives the construction of the city (and, implicitly, of the remainder of the dialogue). Socrates concedes the point to Glaucon and agrees to now examine “the origin of a luxurious city” (372e) even though he says that “the true city” in his opinion is the one they have just described, “the healthy one, as it were” (ibid.). Socrates, forced to set aside the healthy city in deference to Glaucon’s wishes, must now navigate the waters of a treacherous argument constantly attempting to bring Glaucon (and himself) back home to the city of the temperate soul. Little wonder, then, that he complains at 453d of having fallen into “a sea of argument.” Like the Homeric hero, Socrates must travel kata pant’ aste exploring different constitutions and the decline in

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45 But not of course the Odyssey itself, which includes substantially more than Odysseus’ narrative itself such as the coming of age of Telemachus. I thank David J. Murphy for this point.

46 References to the purging of the second city of luxuries are scattered throughout the dialogue; some important elements are the insistence on simpler forms of poetry and story-telling and the rejection of polyharmonic or multistringed instruments in Book 3, a process Socrates sums up as follows at 399d: “And, by the dog, without being aware of it, we’ve been purifying the city we recently said was luxurious.” When Glaucon responds, “That’s because we’re being moderate,” Socrates says, “Then let’s purify the rest” and continues with the topics of meter, lyrics, painting, architecture, and furnishings. On this, see also n. 49, 50 and 51 below.

47 The term is from Parmenides’ poem rather than Homer but, as I have argued in my book, there is a parallel between Homer’s Odyssey and Parmenides’ Peri Phuseōs as well; see my Parmenides, Plato and Mortal Philosophy: Return from Transcendence (London: Continuum, 2011).
the different forms of constitution (through Books 8-9). On the way, he has to endure three waves (Book 5) and a near insurrection (Book 6). Finally, in Book 10, he begins raising the argument from the watery depths with the myth of Glaucus. Following a final and strongly worded condemnation of the poets in Book 10, the Glaucus narrative marks a turn to a *post-Homeric* soteriology. Books 1-9 thus constitute the properly “wandering” portion of Plato’s *nostos* narrative. Plato himself does not use the word *nostos* but there is an implicit *nostos*: the first city, which Socrates called the “true city” and tries to return to throughout the argument.48 In order to return to this city, he has to first purge the luxurious city of its feverish desires, especially in the education of the guardians and the philosopher-kings who are to rule the city.49 Since this city is constructed nowhere else except in Glaucon and Adeimantus’ imagination (cf. εἰ γιγνομένην πόλιν θεασάμεθα λόγως, 369a), Socrates’ purging of the city is in effect a purging of the boys’ souls.50 Once this Odyssean journey of the

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48 “Yet the true city, in my opinion, is the one we’ve described, the healthy one, as it were. But let’s study a city with a fever, if that’s what you want” (*Rep.* 372e). Socrates is making his preference for the first city very clear, and in fact he upholds simplicity over complexity throughout the dialogue. Plato in general looks down upon “turmoil” (πολυπραγμοσύνην) or “straying” (ἀλλοτριοπραγμοσύνην; for both terms see *Rep.* 444b), a condition he considers responsible for or even equates with the increase of injustice in both the individual soul and the state. The result of such an increase is that the soul becomes “multicolored” (ποικίλας), a characteristic he associates with the democratic constitution at 559d. The latter is the second worst of all possible constitutions.

49 The purification of the city of its luxuries, however, does not aim at rescinding luxury for its own sake: rather, as Socrates makes clear at 402c, it is the soul’s character he is interested in. Thus, the external purification in the first half of Book 3 first leads to a discussion of physical purifications (sexual temperance, temperance in food and drink, exercise, avoidance of excessive doctoring or of doctoring brought on by the ills of excess) and then of spiritual purifications (both in the latter half of Book 3). At 404d Socrates purges the city of the prostitutes and pastries that had been introduced into the healthy city at 373a at Glaucon’s urging. Once this is done, he turns increasingly to the question of how the just soul rules both itself and subordinates its body to its rule, in both health and sickness. The discussion of the virtues of the soul culminates in his proposing a form of life for the Guardians at 416d-417b that is so austere (resembling nothing so much as the original healthy city) that it provokes a protest from Adeimantus in the next book at 419a.

50 What is the role of pleasure in this pedagogy? Socrates in the *Philebus* (21d-e) rejects a life without any pleasure as not worth living, and this might lead us to think that this relativizes the claims made in this article. However, this seems to me to be an excessively narrow reading. Socrates is not suggesting that the life of knowledge be combined with a life of licentiousness: such a life is incompatible with the life of the mind. What he is pointing to, rather, is that the life of the mind is not without its share of pleasure. Indeed, its pleasure is of a higher sort than the sensuous pleasures of the non-philosopher. Philebus’ error
soul is completed in Book 9, Book 10 marks the true “homecoming” portion of the Republic.51

The move away from the one city is a fall into multiplicity, that is, into multiple forms of constitution, classes, hierarchies, laws, forms of poetry, myths and metaphors, reminiscent of Odysseus’ voyage through many cities of men (Od. 1.3). Throughout the dialogue, Socrates attempts to undo this dispersal and to lead the soul back to an original state of simplicity, unity, and harmony.52 But this return is not accomplished within the “wandering” portion of the dialogue, the section most rich in nautical metaphors, nor in the concluding myth of Er, but in Er’s theoretical viewing alone.

As Bonifazi has shown, the term nostos did not originally refer to return from the sea. Although, in its default meaning, it is primarily used to describe the return journeys of the Achaean warriors from Troy,53 the more generic meaning is of a “return” or a “homecoming.” Further, as Bonifazi demonstrates in her analysis of the terms νόστος and νέομαι, “the present tense νέομαι is supposed to derive from an older form *νέσομαι, whose meaning is argued to be ‘to save oneself’ (the active form *νέσω meaning ‘to save’).”54 Neomai can thus be said to have the meanings “to reach somewhere successfully,” “to happily come back,” while nostos “is intended to mean ‘homecoming, ‘coming back,’ or ‘safe journey’.”55 Bonifazi thus identifies “surviving lethal dangers” as the “core

is precisely that he identifies pleasure with the good (66d). The Philebus is unambiguous about the superiority of reason to pleasure in its concluding section, although it suggests that there might be a third thing higher than both which combines aspects of both. See also Dorothea Frede, “Rumpelstiltskin’s Pleasures: True and False Pleasures in Plato’s Philebus,” Phronesis 30.2 (1985): 151-80.

51 Bernard Suzanne, too, highlights the Odyssean significance of Book 10; see Bernard Suzanne, http://plato-dialogues.org/tetra_4/republic/gyges.htm. However, Suzanne overemphasizes the contrast between a katabasis and a descent to Hades, on the one hand, and an Odyssean narrative of the soul, on the other.

52 Segal argues that the search for unity is a basic motivation of Greek philosophy. As he puts it, “[s]eeking the essentials, the Greek mind, in the visual arts as in poetry, seeks to recreate the timeless moment when the enduring form shines through the confusing and distracting particulars of experience. Gripped by the power of change, time, and death, and fascinated by the infinite diversity of phenomena and the possibility of endless event and experience, Greek thought reaches in tension for the opposite pole of unity and permanence. Plato found before him and had to reconcile a philosophical tradition which included both an Heraclitus and a Parmenides, a theory that all was flux and theory that motion and change were illusory.” Segal, “‘The Myth was Saved,’” 316.


54 Ibid., 491.

55 Ibid., 492.
meaning” of nostos, a meaning that is still present in Homer in the contrast between the pair νόστος and (ἀπ)όλλυμαι.56 If we hold on to the semantic range of nostos, we can see how the word lends itself to use in the myth of the soul’s descent and return in the Republic, where its nautical associations are subordinated to its soteriological implications.

Although Socrates explicitly leaves behind the nautical realm in the Republic’s concluding myth, which he prefaced with the words “it isn’t, however, a tale of Alcinous that I’ll tell you but that of a brave Pamphylian man called Er, the son of Armenias, who once died in a war” (615b), Book 10 is in many ways the most explicitly Homeric of the Republic’s books. To begin with, Socrates, in recounting this tale of a warrior slain on the battlefield, returns implicitly to the Homeric hero. Yet, this hero is no longer the same as his Homeric archetype: rather than fighting for honor and home, the warrior now crosses over the threshold of life; his education and training as a warrior prepare him for the ontological journey. Like Odysseus, Er also descends into Hades but the message he brings back is different: rather than affirming the return, he affirms the pure transcendence of theoretical viewing. In the Homeric descent, Odysseus meets the shade of Achilles who says to him:

No winning words about death to me, shining Odysseus!
By god, I’d rather slave on earth for another man—
Some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—
Than rule down here over all the breathless dead. (Od. 11.555-559; Lattimore trans.)

Compare this wisdom, which affirms a return to life or to Becoming, with Er’s experiences. Er recounts that after the souls received judgment and spent a cycle of one thousand years paying the price of their actions either in heaven or Hades, they then came to a place from which they saw the entire cosmos suspended from the spindle of Necessity (Ἀνάγκης ἄτρακτον, 616c) while “the spindle itself turned on the lap of Necessity” (στρέφεσθαι δὲ αὐτὸν ἐν τοῖς τῆς Ἀνάγκης γόνασιν, 617b). The arriving souls proceed to Lachesis, where her

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56 Ibid., 492-493. See also Adriana Pignani, “NOSTOS,” in Mathesis e Philia: Studi in onore di Marcello Gigante, ed. Salvatore Cerasuolo (Naples: Dip. di Filologia Classica, Univ. di Napoli, 1995), 449-56. I have, unfortunately, been unable to consult this work. Frame has further sought to elucidate the connection between neomai and nous, but the etymological and linguistic justification for this identification remains controversial; see Douglas Frame, The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978).
Speaker takes a number of lots and a number of models of lives. He then addresses the souls with the words:

Here is the message of Lachesis, the maiden daughter of Necessity. Ephemeral souls, this is the beginning of another cycle that will end in death. Your daemon or guardian spirit will not be assigned to you by lot; you will choose him. The one who has the first lot will be first to choose a life to which he will then be bound by necessity. Virtue knows no master; each will possess it to a greater or less degree, depending on whether he values or disdains it. The responsibility lies with the one who makes the choice; the god has none. (617d)

The Speaker then cast the lots on the ground and all the souls except Er, “who wasn’t allowed to choose” (618d), picked up one next to him. Er reports that the Speaker addressed the souls once more, saying:

There is a satisfactory life rather than a bad one available even for the one who comes last, provided that he chooses it rationally and lives it seriously. Therefore let not the first be careless in his choice nor the last discouraged. (619b)

Er then describes how the different souls made their choice based upon their recollections of their previous lives and their desires for new lives.57 The soul of Ajax, says Er, chose the life of a lion because he remembered the judgment about Achilles’ armour and therefore did not want the life of a human any longer. Agamemnon’s sufferings had made him hate the human race so that he chose the life of an eagle instead. Thersites, a common soldier from the Trojan war (Il. 2.211-277), chose the life of a monkey. Socrates concludes this description of the choice of lives with Odysseus; he says:

57 Plato’s depiction of the lot of lives has attracted much comment and several criticisms. Julia Annas, for example, champions the view that “the myth [is] . . . a lapse from the level of the main moral argument” of the Republic. Julia Annas, “Plato’s Myths of Judgment,” Phronesis 27,2 (1982): 131. Annas is especially critical of Plato’s depiction of the lot of lives arguing that reincarnation is “implausible, and even grotesque” (198). However, as I have argued in a recent essay (Vishwa Adluri, “The Importance of Being Er,” Proceedings of the IX Symposium Platonicum; Plato’s Politeia, vol. 1. International Plato Society [2010]: 144-150), these criticisms are based upon a misunderstanding: Annas fails to take Er’s perspective into account, although Er’s aesthetic viewing of the cosmos represents a transcendence of the cycle of reincarnation.
Now, it chanced that the soul of Odysseus got to make its choice last of all, and since memory of its former sufferings had relieved its love of honor, it went around for a long time looking for the life of a private individual who did his own work. (620c)

When he found it “he chose it gladly and said that he’d have made the same choice even if he’d been first” (ibid.). Once all the souls have chosen, they go to Lachesis who assigns each soul its daemon according to the life it has chosen. The souls then go with their respective daemons to Clotho who confirms the fate that the lottery and the soul’s choice have given it and finally to Atropos who makes the choice irreversible. Finally, the souls pass under the throne of Necessity and enter a burning plain where they camp beside the River of Forgetfulness. As the souls drink from the waters of the river, they forget all that had passed and fall asleep until “around midnight there was a clap of thunder and an earthquake, and they were suddenly carried away from there, this way and that, up to their births, like shooting stars” (621a-b).

The sudden appearance of three of the most preeminent Homeric heroes (and a common soldier from the Trojan war) is significant. The references cannot be dismissed as mere examples to illustrate the fanciful idea of a lot of lives. Above all, the reference to Odysseus is significant in the Odyssean journey of the Republic: what does Odysseus’ choice represent?

In keeping with his reputation for metis and measured judgment, Odysseus carefully chooses his next life bearing in mind his former sufferings. Unlike Ajax and Agamemnon, he does not foolishly permit his experiences to determine his decision. Odysseus’ choice is wise, reflected, the choice of a hero who has chosen a simpler, more tranquil existence—it is the life of a philosopher. Odysseus’ soul alone of all the souls does not regret its choice. Yet, higher even than the choice of Odysseus is the “choice” of Er: not to participate in the lot of lives at all. Although Odysseus makes the best possible choice within Becoming, Er embodies a new, higher soteriological possibility: the transcendence possible through philosophy. He views but does not participate

58 Obviously, I am using “choice” within inverted commas, because it is debatable whether Er actually gets to make a choice; the text rather says that he was not permitted to choose. This would accord with Er’s status as a messenger chosen to look and listen and carry back a report to humans (Rep. 614d), but the point nonetheless holds: not-choosing or not-participating is superior to even Odysseus’ choice.

59 Er to be sure also returns to his body and must wake up; thus, the transcendence hinted at here should not be understood in a crude sense as implying an escape from the body. Plato has often been misunderstood on this count (see n. 45), which is why it is very
in the lot of lives: he becomes the seer rather than the agent of action. Since Odysseus chooses recurrent Becoming, his *nostos* is incomplete: he will set forth again and again—and return again and again. On the stormy seas of the soul’s journey, Plato seems to be saying, Ithaca is only a temporary harbor. With this depiction of the choice of Odysseus in the myth of Er, he thus introduces a new kind of goal into philosophy: rather than the Homeric *nostos* as a return to Becoming, Er represents the ascent to Being (*epandos*, 521c and 532b).60

Two songs—the Odyssean song of Homer and the Platonic song of dialectic—come together in a climactic resolution in Book 10 of the *Republic*. The Odyssean structure of *Republic* 1-9 is subtly transcended and a new kind of journey—linear rather than cyclical, an ascent rather than a nautical voyage, a true being at home rather than a homecoming, and a rational self-identification with the noetic part of the soul rather than being driven by the thumotic soul—gets underway here.

**The Theaetetus**

In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates contrasts the thinkers of Becoming with the philosopher of Being, that is, Parmenides. He says:

> What is really true, is this: the things of which we naturally say that they ‘are’, are in a process of coming to be [πρὸς ἄλληλα γίγνεται πάντα], as the result of movement and change and blending with one another. We are wrong when we say ‘they are’, since nothing ever is [ἔστι μὲν γὰρ οὐδέποτ’ οὐδὲν], but everything comes to be [ἀεὶ δὲ γίγνεται].

And as regards this point of view, let us take it as a fact that all the wise men of the past, with the exception of Parmenides, stand together.

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60 The reading I advocate implies a link between Becoming on an ontological level to Becoming related to the life of the soul. This reading is well supported by ancient philosophy in general (see, for instance, *Phaidr.* 246d: “All soul looks after all that lacks a soul, and patrols all of heaven, taking different shapes at different times”; see also Aristotle *De Anima* 431b21: “The soul is in a sense all things”). I therefore do not see a hiatus between “ontology” and “incarnation” or accept that they represent “two very different meanings of Becoming.” I follow Benardete instead, who in his lecture courses on Plato frequently drew attention to the complementarity (indeed, the identity) of ontology and psychology in Plato’s thought. Benardete coined the term “ontological psychology” in these lectures, which I unfortunately do not find in any of his published writings. See, however, his *Plato’s “Laws”: The Discovery of Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) for his views on the subject.
Let us take it that we find on this side Protagoras and Heraclitus and Empedocles; and also the masters of the two kinds of poetry, Epicharmus in comedy and Homer in tragedy. For when Homer talked about ‘Ocean [Ὠκεανόν], begetter of gods, and Tethys their mother’ [Ὠκεανόν τε θεῶν γένεσιν καὶ μητέρα Τηθύν], he made all things the offspring [ἐκγόνα] of flux and motion [ῥοής τε καὶ κινήσεως]. (152e)

We could explain the reference to Oceanus as a mere metaphor. Socrates, we might think, is critiquing Homer’s use of mythic language to explicate Becoming. Yet, although this explanation fits well with our conception of Plato as a rationalist and of an “ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy” (607b) it is not the entire story. The reference to Homer occurs in the context of a discussion of γένεσις or Becoming and what is at stake here is nothing less than whether anything “is” (ἔστι) or whether everything is always in a state of “coming to be” (ἀεὶ δὲ γίγνεται). Plato contrasts two fundamental ontological theses: on the one hand, that of Parmenides who in his philosophical poem held that “It is, and that it is impossible for anything not to be” (ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἴναι, fr. 2); on the other, that of Homer, who along with Heraclitus and others held that everything was in a constant process of coming to be. Taking Homer rather than Heraclitus to be the archetype of those who assert “Becoming” rather than “Being,” Socrates addresses him as the general of this army (cf. στρατόπεδον καὶ στρατηγὸν Ὅμηρον, Theaet. 153a).63

61 Segal holds that “beneath obvious and fundamental differences Plato is indebted more deeply to Homer than he would avow. Indeed in certain respects he remains true to the poetical vision of man and reality which first appears in the great epics.” In his opinion, “poetry and philosophy . . . share . . . a common indebtedness to the patterns crystallized by an ancient mythic tradition.” Segal, “‘The Myth was Saved’,” 316. Halliwell puts it even more directly: “[c]ontrary to what is sometimes claimed, no simple, unqualified muthos/logos dichotomy is presupposed in Plato’s work.” Halliwell, “The Life-and-Death Journey of the Soul,” 453.

62 Compare the view of Homer presented here with Socrates’ statements in the Cratylus, where he refers to the Heracleitean doctrine that “everything gives way and nothing stands fast” (πάντα χωρεῖ καὶ οὐδὲν μένει) and says of Heraclitus that he thus likens “the things that are to the flowing (ροής) of a river” (ποταμοῦ ροή ἀπεικάζων τὰ ὄντα, 402a). Here, too, he identifies Homer as the source of these views. Socrates also cites Homer as making “Ocean, origin of the gods, and their mother Tethys” (Ὠκεανόν τε θεῶν γένεσίν ... καὶ μητέρα Τηθύν, 402b).

63 Underscoring the great difficulty of challenging the view of everything as being in flux and motion (ῥοής τε καὶ κινήσεως), Socrates says: “[a]nd if anyone proceeded to dispute the field with an army like that—an army led by Homer—he could hardly help making a fool of himself, could he?” (τίς οὖν ἂν ἔτι πρὸς γε τοσοῦτον στρατόπεδον καὶ στρατηγὸν
Socrates’ reference to Oceanus is significant. Oceanus in Homer is frequently described as “a great River, which compasses the earth’s disc, returning into itself.” Homer twice uses the epithet ἀψορρόου meaning “back-flowing” or “refluent” to describe Oceanus (ἀψορρόου Ὠκεανόιο, Od. 20.65; cf. also Il. 18.399). That Socrates takes this Homeric view of Becoming quite seriously can be seen from Theaetetus 179e-180e: Theodorus speaks of “Heraclitean doctrines [or] Homeric or still more ancient” (179e) and Socrates responds that the ancients “used poetical forms which concealed from the majority of men their real meaning, namely, that Ocean and Tethys, the origin of all things, are actually flowing streams, and nothing stands still” (ὡς ἡ γένεσις τῶν ἄλλων πάντων Ὠκεανός τε καὶ Τηθὺς ἁπάντα <ὁντα> τυγχάνει καὶ οὐδὲν ἕστηκε, 180d). He also opposes this view of Becoming to that of the “other thinkers who have announced the opposite view; who tell us that ‘Unmoved is the Universe,’ and other similar statements which we hear from a Melissus or a Parmenides as against the whole party of Heracliteans. These philosophers insist that all things are One, and that this One stands still, itself within itself, having no place in which to move” (180d-e). These clues in the Theaetetus parallel a more sustained critique of Homer undertaken in the Republic. 66

Socrates also invokes the contrast between Becoming and Being in the Republic, where it is definitive of the philosophers. He says that they must

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64 LSJ, s.v. “Οκεανός.”

65 The use of the sea as a metaphor for Becoming is not limited to Homer; it is an enduring motif in Post-Platonic philosophy as well. The second book of Lucretius’ De rerum natura, for example, also opens with an extended meditation on the sea as a metaphor for nature (2.1-33).

66 There are several levels to Plato’s criticism of Homer: (1) a critique of mimēsis, (2) a critique of the content of Homeric narrative or education, (3) the form of this narrative, and (4) the effect of tragedy on the performer, listener, and on children, and finally, whether Homer ever actually established laws or led an army. Rather than restrict ourselves to Plato’s criticism of imitative poetry, we need to see this criticism against the background of a wider critique of Homer’s cosmology and ontology.

67 My argument does not assume temporal priority of the Theaetetus’ critique, though some have chosen to read it that way. This misunderstanding possibly arises from the fact that readers tend to separate the critique of poetry in the Republic from that of ontology, and to think that the Platonic critique of Homeric ontology in the Republic must build upon an earlier dialogue, namely the Theaetetus. However, my claim is more nuanced: the critique of Homeric poetry is a propadeutic to a critique of his ontology and it is only
“learn to rise up out of becoming and grasp being, if they are ever to become rational” (διὰ τὸ τῆς οὐσίας ἁπτέον εἶναι γενέσεως ἐξαναδύντι, ἢ μηδὲποτε λογιστικῷ γενέσθαι, 525b). Beyond and beneath the explicit criticism of the poets in the Republic, something more seems to be at stake: the discrimination between Being and Becoming leading to a philosophical self-transformation. In opposing a Homeric view of Becoming with an understanding of stable Being, from the perspective of the latter that we can begin to make sense of Plato’s objections to Homer.

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68 For similar statements, see 518d, 521d, 523a, 526e, and 527b. At 529b, Socrates equates “that which is” with “that which is invisible” (τὸ ὄν τε ᾖ καὶ τὸ ἀόρατον) recalling the discussion at Theaetetus 155c: Socrates says to Theaetetus, “[t]hen you have a look around, and see that none of the uninitiated are listening to us—I mean the people who think that nothing exists but what they can grasp with both hands; people who refuse to admit that actions and processes and the invisible world in general [πᾶν τὸ ἀόρατον] have any place in reality.”

69 Socrates prefaces the criticism of the poets in Book 10 with an apologia addressed to Homer of whom he says that “the love and respect I’ve had for Homer since I was a child make me hesitate to speak, for he seems to have been the first teacher and leader of all these fine tragedians. All the same, no one is to be honored or valued than the truth” (595b). While scholars such as Moss and Janaway and even Annas focus narrowly on the criticism of mìmēsis in Book 10, the criticism of Homer from an aesthetic perspective appears subordinate to the myth of Er as a non-Homeric soteriology.

70 This transformation is characterized in many ways in Plato, most notably in terms of the contrast between cognition directed toward sensible things and cognition directed toward ideal or intelligible entities. However, the change from the former to the latter is not framed just in epistemological terms as the terms metanoia or metanoēsis would suggest, but also implies an ethical and existential dimension (as Plato makes clear by also using the term periagōgē for this change, see Rep. 521c).

71 My argument here depends to a degree on reading the two dialogues synchronously, that is, accepting Homer as the paradigmatic philosopher of Becoming as established by Plato in the Theaetetus, and hence considering him to be implicitly present at the background of Plato’s critique of becoming in the Republic. Such a view is not far-fetched, since a comparative reading of the Platonic dialogues is standard practice in Platonic scholarship. I disagree with the view that Homer is not the implied target of the critique of Becoming in the Republic or the assertion, frequently found in scholarship, that the critique of Homer in the Republic is a critique of mìmēsis and not of genesis. As I have argued earlier, the critique of mìmēsis is essentially a critique of genesis: the entire cosmos of Becoming is nothing but an imitation as Socrates demonstrates using the example of the all-creating artist with the mirror at 569c-e. The actions of this pan-creator also recall the Demiurge of the Timaeus who creates the universe by looking to what is eternal and immutable as a model and reproducing this in his creation (see Tim. 28a-29a, see also 37d-e for “time” as the “moving image [εἰκόνα] of eternity”).
Plato draws upon Parmenidean ontology and a conception of noetic salvation to create a narrative of great complexity.

**Conclusion**

Thus, rather than seeing the Platonic dialogue as an exclusively political work or focusing on the alleged rivalry between the poets and the philosopher in the *Republic*, we should examine the dialogue for clues to a fundamental difference concerning the interpretation of Becoming and Being. Whereas the Homeric narrative describes an “eternal recurrence” without hope of a true transcendence of Becoming, Plato contrasts the cyclical temporality of Becoming with the eternity of Being thus enabling a new form of soteriology: the rational salvation made possible by philosophy.

**Bibliography**

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72 Rosen, for example, views the entire dialogue as structured in terms of a tension between the philosopher, the apotheosis of apolitical existence, and the city. Thus, he writes: “In the *Republic*, Plato presents us with his most comprehensive portrait of the Socratic effort to bring philosophy down from heaven into the city. This effort faces the insuperable difficulty that, when philosophy completes its descent, it is sooner or later transformed into ideology. In order to survive, philosophy must preserve its heavenly residence. But this in turn depends upon the philosophical intervention in the affairs of the earthly city. This city must be made safe for philosophy. But philosophy must also be made safe for the city. If this dual responsibility is not properly discharged, the inner balance between theory and practice dissolves.” S. Rosen, *Plato’s Republic: A Study* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 389.

73 By “rational” here, I do not mean to suggest that Homeric theology is irrational. Rather, I mean “rational” in the narrow sense that Platonic theology is based on the principle of non-contradiction and that we can hence systematically trace its steps from Becoming to Being. Thus, I do not mean to oppose the (alleged) irrationality of *múthos* to an (allegedly) rational philosophical *logos* in Plato; as the work of Luc Brisson shows, the *múthos/logos* distinction is a creation of modern scholarship.
Plato’s Saving Mūthos


