

## Plato's Dream

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According to *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, Plato, who was about to die, saw a dream, in which he turned into a swan and leaped from one tree to another, causing great trouble to fowlers. Although it is possible for it to be a mere anecdote, suppose that he really saw it. Then, what can we say about it? Interpreters unanimously take it to be the dream that old Plato saw just before his death. But I take it to be that of young Plato, who was so seriously ill as to be unable to attend Socrates' death (cf. *Phaedo*). My interpretation is strongly supported by the fact that the story of Plato's dream is accompanied by its interpretation by Simmias, one of the main characters in the *Phaedo*, who is not supposed to have outlived Plato.

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### 1. Testimony

There is a story concerning Plato's dream he saw when he was about to die. *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* [henceforth, *Prolegomena*] refers to it in his explanation of Plato's divine and Apollonian character (1.20–46 Westerink).

Plato was divine and Apollonian. And that he was divine is clear both from his own words and from the dreams. It is clear from his own words, for he called himself a 'fellow-servant of the swans [to Apollo]', and from the dreams, as follows:

His teacher Socrates saw in a dream, one day before Plato came to frequent his company, an unfledged swan coming and sitting in his lap; it then grew wings and flew up, crying out to him in a loud and shrill voice, in such a way as to grasp all the people hearing it. It showed that Plato, who was not yet accomplished, would frequent him and would be accomplished and become so eminent in his doctrines that all the people would long to learn them, with no one being able to resist or trying to resist.

And Plato himself also saw in a dream, when he was about to die (ἐν τῷ μέλλειν τελευτᾶν 1.29), himself turning into a swan, leaping from one tree to another and causing great trouble to the fowlers, making it impossible for them to grasp him. Hearing about this dream, Simmias the Socratic said that all human beings would be eager to apprehend Plato's thought, but none would be able to do so, each person presenting his own interpretation according to what seemed to him, whether the subject chosen is to do with gods or nature or anything else. For this is a quality common to Homer and Plato: owing to the harmonious character of their expression, both of them are accessible to everyone, irrespective of the way

one may want to treat them.

However, it is not only these dreams that made it clear that he was Apollonian, but also the way of his life, which is that of purification. That is to say, the God himself is of such a nature, as his very name shows: Apollo means ‘he who is separated from many things (*pollōn*)’, with the prefix *a-* expressing privation.

We conjecture also from the time of his birth that he was Apollonian: for he was born on the 7th of Thargelion, the day on which the Delians celebrate the festival of Apollo. Socrates was born on the 6th of the same month, the day on which they celebrated the birthday festival of Artemis. This shows the priority of Socrates both in respect of time and in respect of argument (*logos*).

Olympiodorus also says as follows (*Commentary on the first Alcibiades of Plato* [henceforth, *In Alcib.*] 2.155–167):

Having established many people as his lovers and benefited most of them, he saw a dream, when he was about to die (μέλλων τελευτᾶν 2.156), to the effect that he turned into a swan, and flew from one tree to another and thus caused great trouble to the fowlers. The judgement made by Simmias the Socratic on this dream was that Plato will be ungraspable for those in the future that want to interpret him: for the interpreters are similar to fowlers who try to hunt after the intentions of the ancient people, but he is ungraspable because it is possible to understand his works physically, ethically, theologically, and in a word in many ways, just like the works of Homer. For these two souls are said to have come to embrace all modes of harmony, and thus it is possible to understand both of them in all kinds of ways. When he died, the Athenians honoured him with a costly funeral and inscribed on his tomb the following words, ‘Apollo begot two sons, Asclepius and Plato, the one to save the soul, and the other to save the body’. So much for his birth and life, and now we must embark on our present topic.

## 2. When was Plato about to die?

The first question that occurs to us concerning the dream Plato is said to have had is: ‘Did Plato really see it?’ Riginos (1976) 24, for example, takes it to be a mere anecdote derived from the other anecdote in *Prolegomena*, the one concerning the dream Socrates saw, a cygnet developing into a full-fledged swan in his lap and flying forth into the open sky singing a song that charmed all hearers.<sup>1</sup> If this was just an anecdote, there would be no meaning in asking any question about the situation of Plato’s death. But suppose it is based on Plato’s own experience of seeing a dream, then there is certainly some meaning in asking whether there is any historical backdrop against which this story was made.

In investigating into Plato’s dream, let me ask first whether Plato saw it when young or when

1 Also cf. Apuleius, *De Platone* 1.1; Pausanias 1.30.2; DL 3.5; Tertullian, *De anima* 46.9; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.8; Olympiodorus, *In Alcib.* 2.83–86; *Scholion in Lucanum* 10.180; Suidas s.v. Πλάτων; Ioannes Saresberiensis, *Polycrat.* 2.17.433C–D. This work of mine was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP16K02116.

old. It may sound meaningless to ask this question, because both *Prolegomena* and Olympiodorus are in agreement in saying that he saw it when he was about to die. In fact, as far as I could check, all the interpreters take this to be the dream of the old Plato just before his death.<sup>2</sup> Olympiodorus' comment that he saw the dream, when he was about to die, having established many people as his lovers and benefited most of them (2.155–156), suggests that he understood the time of the dream as 'just before Plato's death'. The author of *Prolegomena*, who is supposed to belong 'in the immediate surroundings of Olympiodorus and Elias', and to be reporting 'the lectures of one of his [Olympiodorus'] successors in the second half of the sixth century',<sup>3</sup> is also likely to have taken this to be the dream of the old Plato. But Olympiodorus lived in the 6th century CE, and thus Olympiodorus and *Prolegomena* may have diverged from the original story in their understanding of the situation of Plato's dream.

Now, all the English translations I have consulted use the word 'before' in translating ἐν τῷ μέλλειν τελευτᾶν in *Prolegomena* (1.29). But in fact there is no such word in this phrase, whose literal translation is rather 'in the state of being about to die', or 'when he was about to die'. The time when one is about to die does not have to be the occasion of one's death, for a person who is about to die may luckily survive.

Besides, if it was really the time before Plato's death, there arises the following problem: How could other people know the contents of the dream? This problem may be solved, if one adds, like Westerink (1962) and Tigerstedt (1977), 'shortly' before 'before his death' or 'before he died', for its addition allows Plato to have a short time in which he could have related his dream to his friends. And it may be actually possible to take ἐν τῷ μέλλειν τελευτᾶν (when he was about to die) as suggesting that Plato's death was not an instant death; at some point of the process of dying, he may have seen the dream, and after leaping from one tree to another tree, without being caught by any fowler, the swan (his soul) may have returned again to his body, so as to enable Plato, who woke up from the dream, to talk to his friends about what he had experienced in the dream, before he finally moved to the Hades.

But I do not take the phrase in this way. The proper way of taking ἐν τῷ μέλλειν τελευτᾶν is 'when he was about to die', and in one of Plato's own works there is a reference to some incident in which Plato may have had this near-death experience.

Let us here ask why Simmias was specifically mentioned as the interpreter of the dream? The only reason I can think of is his role as one of the main interlocutors in the *Phaedo*. Of course, the person whose death is explicitly dealt with in the *Phaedo* is Socrates, not Plato, but Plato's illness is mentioned in this dialogue as the reason for his absence on the day of Socrates' death (59b). As to the question whether Plato was really ill or not, I have argued, in relation with Socrates' last words, for the view that Plato was seriously ill, nearly dying, and that due to his inability to move, he could not visit Socrates, however eager he wanted to be near Socrates. I also have argued that because the symptoms of his disease were those of the plague, he and his family tried to keep it secret. So I

2 Westerink (1962) ('shortly before his death'); Tigerstedt (1977) 11 ('shortly before he died'); Riginos (1976) 24 ('before his death'); Trouillard (1990) 2 ('au moment de mourir'); Desmond (2011) 19 ('just before his death').

3 Westerink (1962) XLIX, L.

do not discuss this question here,<sup>4</sup> but I want anyway to start from the assumption that the young Plato was actually about to die on that occasion.

Then, which is more likely, for the dream to have visited the young Plato or the old Plato?

### 3. Simmias' date of death

For the dream to be that of the old Plato, it is necessary for Simmias to have outlived Plato. Now, among the epitaphs that are traditionally reported to have been dedicated to Plato there is one in the *Palatine Anthology* attributed to Simmias.<sup>5</sup> If it is the work of Simmias of Thebes, it follows that he actually outlived Plato. But the authorship is under controversy. There is another Simmias, Simmias of Rhodes, a poet who was active in the early third century BCE. But because this poet was active a century after Plato's death, it is usually taken to be unlikely for his epigram to be inscribed on Plato's stele; besides, the dialect, the style and the transmission of the epitaph may tell against Simmias of Rhodes.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, what is taken to be the strongest evidence for the authorship of the epitaph as Simmias of Thebes is the story about Plato's dream in *Prolegomena* and Olympiodorus, accompanied by the assumption that Plato had the dream just before his death.<sup>7</sup> But as I have pointed out above, it is not certain that it was the dream of the old Plato.

As a matter of fact, the following consideration rather suggests that Simmias died before Plato, and thus that the dream is that of the young Plato. Although Simmias is referred to as νεανίσκος (youth) together with Cebes in the *Phaedo* (89a4), this expression is applicable even to a man of thirty years of age. Agathon in Plato's *Symposium*, who is called νεανίσκος, was more than thirty years old, when the banquet was held.<sup>8</sup> Besides, the word νεανίσκος could be employed interchangeably with νεανίης, which could mean 'youthful', with good nuance of 'impetuous, brave, active', or with bad nuance of 'hot-headed, headstrong'. The challenges by Simmias and Cebes to Socrates were exactly the kind of challenges that young people with some impetuosity or hot-headedness would bring up.

There are also two other places where Simmias is referred to in Plato. First, in the *Crito* (45b) he was specifically mentioned as the person who had brought enough money to spend for Socrates' escape, from his eagerness to do anything for Socrates' sake. Simmias is thus supposed to have had some substantial money he could freely use. Next, in the *Phaedrus* (242b) he is referred to as an instigator of arguments, exceeding even Phaedrus, who as a lover of discussion has brought into being more discourses than anyone who has been born in his lifetime, either by speaking them himself or by compelling others to do so.<sup>9</sup> The date of birth of Phaedrus is supposed to be in or

4 Cf. Kanayama (2014). After that I presented an enlarged version at The Classics and Ancient History Department Seminar, at CCANESA, University of Sydney (6 March 2014), the Institute for Research in Contemporary Political and Economic Affairs, Waseda University (16 May 2014), the Berkeley Ancient Philosophy Workshop, University of California, Berkeley (2 September 2014), and most recently at XI Symposium Platonicum; Plato's *Phaedo*, International Plato Society, Universidade de Brasília (8 July 2016), for which cf. Kanayama (2016).

5 Cf. Notopoulos (1939) 143 n. 43.

6 Notopoulos (1942) 281–2.

7 Notopoulos (1942) 282 cites this as the argument made by S. Sternbach, *Meletemata Graeca*, Vienna, Gerold, 1886.

8 Parmentier (1926) 24.

9 In relation to Socrates, Simmias is also referred to in pseudo-Plato, *Letter* 13.363a as a person appearing in Plato's *Phaedo* as a chief interlocutor; in Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.2.48 and 3.11.17 as one of the people who are attracted by Socrates, to become good and fine.

before 444.<sup>10</sup> Then, would it be possible for a person much younger than Phaedrus to emulate him in the number of instigated arguments, or to be well known as such a person?<sup>11</sup> And if he had been around the same age as Phaedrus, he would have been about ninety seven years old when Plato died in 348/7 BCE, which makes us doubt that Simmias of Thebes commented on the dream Plato had just before his death. And finally if Parmentier is correct in assuming that Plato is supposed to have refrained from introducing as main interlocutors people who were still alive because they could have been consulted concerning the roles Plato assigned to them in his dialogues,<sup>12</sup> it will certainly follow that Simmias of Thebes did not outlive Plato.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. Simmias' source and the originality of his prediction

Finally let us ask from whom Simmias could learn about Plato's dream. It is easy to find an answer if we suppose that the dream visited the young Plato, because Simmias was present in the prison when Socrates died. He could have learnt about the dream from Plato or from someone else after Plato's full recovery from the disease. On the other hand, it is certainly difficult for interpreters who take it that the dream visited the old Plato to explain how Simmias came to know about the dream. The only possibility is that Simmias was such a close friend of Plato's that the news of his death and dream was conveyed to him wherever he might have been, and made him to present his own interpretation of the dream (and possibly write the epitaph for Plato).

Simmias explains the inability of the fowlers to catch the swan as representing the difficulty of apprehending Plato's thought, because Plato's works allow for so many ways of interpretation. But this is what Plato himself expresses about his writings. For example, Plato makes Socrates say in the *Phaedrus* (277d–278a) that writers who believe that any certainty or clearness can be left in their works deserve reproach, because writings can serve only as reminders to those who already know. Thus as far as the impossibility of grasping the exact meaning of any passage of Plato's text is concerned, there is no novelty in Simmias' prediction. The originality of Simmias in this case will consist in *connecting* the swan's escape with the difficulty of catching Plato's thought. But suppose that Simmias predicted, on the basis of the dream of the young Plato, his successful and splendid future as a philosopher and writer. This is certainly more original, and will be worthy to become an anecdote. But having said that, I cannot help admitting that Plato's dream also leaps from one tree to another, escaping the final grasp of any fowler.

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10 Nails (2002) 232.

11 Cf. Parmentier (1926) 24.

12 Parmentier (1913) 165–173. Cf. also Robin (1935, 1988<sup>2</sup>) 27 n.1; Notopoulos (1939) 143 n. 43.

13 Cf. Notopoulos (1939) 143 n. 43; (1942) 283.

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