CHAPTER THIRTEEN

COMBATING OBLIVION:
THE MYTH OF ER AS BOTH PHILOSOPHY’S
CHALLENGE AND INSPIRATION

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That the Republic should end with any myth must surprise anyone who has followed the dialogue’s critique of poetry and its generally hostile attitude towards traditional myths. But what should be much more surprising is the particular myth that is chosen. For the Myth of Er is a strange myth. Unlike other Platonic myths, what it directly describes are not the heavenly joys awaiting the virtuous nor the punishments awaiting the vicious; Er’s access to these is confined to the recollections of the souls he encounters.¹ What the myth directly describes, and what Er sees, is an ambiguous transitional state between lives where all is given over to free choice, chance, carelessness, and oblivion. Far from being morally edifying, this spectacle is, in the words of the myth itself, pitiful, comic and bewildering. Why, then, end with such a myth a dialogue whose argument has insisted on the absolute rule of reason both within the soul and within the city? The aim of the present paper is to show that what the Republic leaves us with is an irresolvable tension between what the philosopher demands and the tragicomedy of human life depicted in the myth: a tension which is key to understanding the dialogue as whole. To characterize the myth as only an illustration or dramatization of the dialogue’s philosophical argument,² or indeed as ‘un hymne à la rationalité’,³ is completely to miss this tension. My approach in what follows will be to highlight some of the key aspects of our human fate and nature as recounted by the myth that appear to render problematic the dialogue’s argument up to this point. I will then consider why a myth is chosen to accomplish this task as well as what this might tell us about Plato’s use of myths in general.

¹ Specifically, Er can only hear from the souls descended from heaven their recollections (ἀναμνησκομένας) of the extraordinarily beautiful sights (.fromString) they saw there.
³ Droz (1992), 146.
The myth takes the form of Socrates’ narration of Er’s narration of what he saw in, according to the Grube/Reeve translation, ‘the world beyond,’ according to the Leroux translation, ‘là-bas,’ according to the Vretska translation ‘im Jenseits,’ but according to the Greek, simply ‘over there’ (ekei, 614b7). Indeed, a fundamental ambiguity of the myth is the location of the place Er is describing. This place is neither in the heavens nor beneath the earth since the souls are described as coming to it from the heavens or from beneath the earth. As Proclus already saw, the description of this place as a daimonios topos (614c1) suggests a place between the heavenly realm of the gods and the earthly realm of mortals. But can this ‘in between’ be precisely located? And can it be sharply distinguished from this world and our present condition, itself in between the heavens and the place beneath the earth? Whether or not these questions can be answered, they at least point to what is arguably the myth’s most peculiar and striking feature: its emphatically this-worldly description of the world beyond. In a number of ways to be considered next, the myth seems almost systematically to blur dichotomies that have come to define ‘Platonism’.

The first such dichotomy to be blurred is that between the soul and the body. One would expect a myth of a world beyond to describe the souls there as completely lacking any attachment to the body and even to personhood in the fullest sense. But the contrary is the case here. As Halliwell has noted, the myth of Er depicts the souls as ‘embodied, spatio-temporally enduring entities’ and thus as persons (459, 461–462). For example, they are described as traveling to different places, wearing their verdicts around their necks, having their hands, feet and necks shackled, and, perhaps most interestingly, using language. These souls indeed seem indistinguishable from their embodied counterparts in this world. This is not to deny that the myth...