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A SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE OF SPACE IN THE MYTH OF ER

ABSTRACT. Stróżyński Mateusz, *A Symbolic Language of Space in the Myth of Er*.

The narrative of the myth of Er often seems difficult to follow and understand, because the laws of spatial relations are being continuously bent or broken. The author claims that these inconsistencies have a symbolic meaning. Space is an image for the soul and spatial transformations reflect the dynamics of contemplation in which the inner and the outer are transcended.

Key words: Plato, contemplation soul, space.

In this paper I would like to present an interpretation of the Myth of Er which ends the *Republic*, an interpretation which may reconcile contradictions that we find in this narrative. I will try to show that a peculiar way of dealing with space in this myth can have a deeper meaning and that it refers to transformations of awareness in the context of Platonic contemplation. The main thesis of this paper is that what was expressed symbolically in the Myth of Er was the contemplative experience of the soul as a space.

In regard to the role myth played in Greek philosophy and in Plato specifically, two important works should be mentioned. One is Marcel Detienne's book *The Creation of Mythology* in which the author presented a structuralist, Lévi-Straussian view on myth, claiming that myth is not "a story" nor does it have to be.¹ This opinion was discussed by Luc Brisson in his book *Plato: The Myth Maker* which defends a more traditional, classicist approach to myth as a sort of a story and a form of literary expression.² Brisson points out that Plato, while writing about myth, always emphasised the fact that it is a story.³ Brisson in his book gives also an answer to the question what is *mythos* for Plato and claims that it is a mode of discourse opposed to *logos*. The latter is argumentative and falsifiable, while myth is neither of these and serves a different purpose. Myth in Plato is to persuade

¹ M. Detienne, *The Creation of Mythology*, transl. M. Cook, Chicago 1986.

² L. Brisson, *Plato: The Myth Maker*, transl. G. Naddaf, Chicago 1998.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 136.

readers which are unable to understand argumentative discourse fully and it does that by referring to irrational, affective parts of the soul.⁴

Kathryn A. Morgan in a recently published book⁵ goes both beyond the discussion between Detienne and Brisson and beyond Brisson's account of the role of myth in Plato. She claims that myth is at heart of ancient philosophy and cannot be labelled an irrational, inferior way of speaking. She even seems to suggest that Plato's myths of the soul culminate in expressing the ineffable mystical intuition which is "metalogical" and which is the goal of philosophy.⁶ Yet she insists that myth and rational discourse cannot be separated in order to either place *mythos* beneath, or above *logos*. Rather, they seem to be dynamically intertwined and the scope of Morgan's book is to show their interaction and mutual relations.⁷

The Myth of Er is one of the most difficult and intriguing among Plato's myths. Scholars dealing with it were mostly interested with its moral implications and with the model of the universe depicted in it.⁸ Yet some other puzzling details of the Er's account also draw their attention.⁹ Hilda Richardson in her article¹⁰ presented various approaches to the myth and focused on the meaning of the metaphor of light in it. She argued that Plato refers to Pythagorean ideas of divine fire at the center of the universe, equating fire with Plato's light. She also acknowledged problems posed by the way Plato describes places and viewpoints, but her sole interest here was to show the identity between the central and the peripheral light/fire in the Er's account.

Wolfgang Biesterfeld in his book¹¹ is primarily concerned with the concept of reincarnation and its moral implications and he compares it to the Middle-East beliefs as well as to Hindu and Buddhist religious texts of that time. Commenting on the metaphor of light he interprets this as the world-soul, following Richardson, and he notices that the way Er approaches the light can refer to some sort of ascent through stages towards the vision of the Forms (represented as the rainbow light in the myth). He points out the fact that the light seems to be at the same time at the center of the universe and embraces it, which is in accord with Pythagorean and Pla-

⁴ Ibidem, pp. 7-11 and 116-121.

⁵ K. A. Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato*, Cambridge 2000.

⁶ Ibidem, pp. 1-4 and 185-187.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 5 and next.

⁸ See: ibidem, pp. 201-209 and W. Biesterfeld, *Der Platonische Mythos des Er (Politeia 614b-621d). Versuch einer Interpretation und Studien zum Problem Östlicher Parallelen*, Münster 1969.

⁹ Robert Brumbaugh presented symbolical interpretation of mathematical images in the myth of Er: R.S. Brumbaugh, *Colors of the Hemispheres in Plato's Myth of Er (Republic 616 E)*, "Classical Philology" 46 (3), 1951, pp. 173-176 and *Plato Republic 616 E: The Final Law of Nines*, "Classical Philology" 49 (1), 1954, pp. 33-34. J. Morrison compared the Myth of Er to some earlier models of the universe, particularly to the Parmenides' one: J.S. Morrison, *Parmenides and Er*, "Journal of Hellenic Studies" 75, 1955, pp. 59-68.

¹⁰ H. Richardson, *The Myth of Er (Plato, Republic, 616b)*, "The Classical Quarterly" 20 (3/4), 1926, pp. 113-133.

¹¹ W. Biesterfeld, op. cit.

tonic understanding of the cosmic soul, yet he does not explore further this and other peculiarities of space imagery in Plato's narrative.¹²

Although scholars tried to interpret the complex spatial references in the myth, they never tried to give any meaning to the transformations of space themselves. Richardson mentions disagreements between Adam, Stewart or Heath¹³ concerning relations between the spectators and the light in the Myth of Er. J. Morrison in his interpretation rejects many traditional readings of the text and interestingly tries to resolve the problems with space in the myth by claiming that contradictory descriptions are not equally important, but that Plato simply considers them in order to ultimately choose only one among them.¹⁴ The purpose of this article is an attempt to find a symbolic meaning in those apparent incongruencies and transformations. I will show that all these contradictions cannot be successfully overcome unless space is understood symbolically and then I will try to decode the symbolic language used by Plato in the Myth of Er. What I would like to show is that the language of space is a symbolic way of speaking about contemplative awareness of the soul in relation to its objects and about the process of spiritual ascent through philosophy.

WHAT ER COULD AND COULD NOT SEE IN HIS JOURNEY: TRANSFORMATIONS OF SPACE

The moment of Er's death indicates a tremendous change: he is no longer subject to the laws or limitations of the body. Plato certainly wants his reader at this point to change a way of seeing things and the death itself has a great symbolic meaning for the one who called philosophy an exercise in dying, that is, in separating the soul from the body, while still alive.¹⁵ When we hear that Er has died, we are invited to another dimension of being, a philosophical and contemplative realm in which the pure soul can see things beyond the obstacles that are caused by its imprisonment in the body.

Er, once he has died, is being led along with many other souls of the dead to a $\tau\acute{o}\pi\omicron\varsigma\ \delta\alpha\iota\mu\acute{o}\nu\iota\omicron\varsigma$, to some divine place. Plato does not say what kind of place is that, he only subtly points out that this place ($\tau\acute{o}\pi\omicron\varsigma$) belongs to a space much different from the places we know, since it is called $\delta\alpha\iota\mu\acute{o}\nu\iota\omicron\varsigma$, belonging to gods, divine and mysterious. It is intriguing that he uses exactly the same adjective which appears in the very climax of the *Republic*, when Socrates reveals, as much as he can, the

¹² Ibidem, pp. 36-39.

¹³ J. Adam, *The Republic of Plato*, Cambridge 1902, notes on 616b, 621b and App.VI to book X; J.A. Stewart, *The Myths of Plato*, London 1905, pp. 152 and 167; T. Heath, *Aristarchus of Samos*, Oxford 1913, p. 152.

¹⁴ Morrison, in his discussion of the light phenomenon, says that it is not a pillar and, more importantly, not the *axis mundi* at all, but that Er sees the light as a rainbow. According to him, it implies that the light is actually "a loop of light" (p. 67).

¹⁵ *Phaedo*, 64a-67c.

nature of the Good and Glaucon cries out in an inspired amazement: *δαίμονίας ὑπερβολῆς!*¹⁶ *Δαίμωνιος* does not mean merely “otherworldly”, but the most holy, entirely other than we know. Er goes to a “place” and thus he begins his journey through space which is marked by a peculiar language. What kind of place is he in?

There are two openings in the earth and two in the heaven, which are exactly opposite to each other. What is interesting for us is space in this fragment. There are certain arbitrary qualities to it: there is the heaven above, the underworld beneath and the surface of the earth in the middle, where the judges sit and where is the Er’s observation point. There is also the right and the left side. It is arbitrary, because, of course, from a different observation point the left would be the right, and the other way round, but here they are not relative, they are absolute. The right and the above symbolizes what is good, the left and the below, what is evil. But where is this divine place Er has come to? It looks very much like Hades, because it is a place of judgment and the judges could be Minos, Rhadamanthys and Sarpedon, sending souls to heaven or hell. But, at the same time, it cannot be under the earth, since there is the heaven above and there is also the hell under the earth. It can be on earth, but Plato does not say, where this could be. There was, however, a meadow there, where the just souls could spend their time, talking and telling their stories.

After seven days there is another shift in the narrative, because Er leaves this meadow and continues the journey.¹⁷ The journey means here that he moves, that is, he changes places in space. Plato says that he comes to a place from which they could see a column of light. This passage is rather vague and, as I mentioned in the introduction, caused problems for interpretation. There is a question where such a place can be, in which one could see the whole sphere of the universe pierced through by a column of light, see it all literally *from above*? The first place in Er’s journey was apparently inside the universe, most probably in the middle of it and maybe on the surface of earth. The second place is seemingly outside the world, wherever and however that can be.¹⁸

¹⁶ Plato, *Republic*, 509c. Ed. J. Henderson, trans. P. Shorey, Cambridge–London 2000; all Greek and English quotations from the *Republic* in this article are from this edition.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 616b-617d.

¹⁸ ἐπειδὴ δὲ τοῖς ἐν τῷ λειμῶνι ἑκάστοις ἑπτὰ ἡμέραι γένοιντο, ἀναστάντας ἐντεῦθεν δεῖν τῇ ὀγδόῃ πορεύεσθαι, καὶ ἀφικνεῖσθαι τεταρταίους ὄθεν καθορᾶν ἄνωθεν διὰ παντὸς τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς τεταμένον φῶς εὐθύ, οἷον κίονα, μάλιστα τῇ ἴριδι προσφερῆ, λαμπρότερον δὲ καὶ καθαρώτερον. Εἰς δ’ ἀφικέσθαι προελθόντας ἡμερησίαν ὁδόν, καὶ ἰδεῖν αὐτόθι κατὰ μέσον τὸ φῶς ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ τὰ ἄκρα αὐτοῦ τῶν δεσμῶν τεταμένα· εἶναι γὰρ τοῦτο τὸ φῶς ξύνδεσμον τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, οἷον τὰ ὑποζώματα τῶν τριήρων, οὕτω πᾶσαν ξυνέχον τὴν περιφορὰν· ἐκ δὲ τῶν ἄκρων τεταμένον Ἀνάγκης ἄτρακτον, δι’ οὗ πᾶσας ἐπιστρέφουσθαι τὰς περιφορὰς (616b-c). J. Morrison links ἄνωθεν not with καθορᾶν, but with τεταμένον, by which he tries to resolve the paradox (J.

Plato says aenigmatically that the souls came *to* the light, but we know this only from a relative sentence, when he mentions the light $\epsilon\iota\varsigma\ \delta\acute{\alpha}\phi\acute{\iota}\kappa\epsilon\sigma\theta\alpha\iota$, “to which they have come”. We know nothing about the whereabouts of this place. Is it near the light? In the light? Somewhere above it perhaps? And there is still the question how they could be in the light, which goes through the whole cosmos?

There, being in the light or looking through the light (the expression $\kappa\alpha\tau\grave{\alpha}\ \mu\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\sigma\upsilon\ \tau\grave{\omicron}\ \phi\acute{\omega}\varsigma$ can be understood in either way) which Plato calls “the light from heaven” they saw the ends of those bounds or chains that keep the universe together. This light is as if a belt surrounding the sphere of the world, but it also goes through this sphere. Plato compares these luminous bounds to $\upsilon\pi\omicron\ \zeta\acute{\omega}\mu\alpha\tau\alpha$, the ropes that strengthen the construction of a trireme, joining the prow with the stern. So the purpose of this light is to hold the universe together and make it one whole. A similar question can be asked: where do they look from? Are they in the middle of the column of light? How can they see what is outside the sphere of the universe, if they are in it? The next moment they see again the column which is *axis mundi*, the axis of the universe. There is a shift in their vision, but we do not know, whether they change an observation point, because Plato does not say anything about it.¹⁹

Looking into or through this light, Er sees that it is the spindle of Ananke, the spindle of the world. What he sees is entirely different from the vision described before. Until now he has just seen the sphere of universe and its axis. These two in normal conditions are impossible to be seen from the same observation point, since one is outside, the other inside. Around the luminous shaft of the spindle there are eight spheres which resemble a wool around a real spindle. Plato suggests that they are rather hemispheres and compares them to vessels which are put one into another, so that they fit, each one being a bit smaller than the one it is in. They should be hemispheres, because Er sees their cross-section, and only thus he could see that there are eight spheres placed in each other, if they are not entirely transparent, which is another possibility we have to consider. Anyway, the surface of the cross-section resembles the whorl of the spindle, which is at the bottom of it and moves around the shaft. Where could Er be to look at the hemispheric universe? At the top of the luminous axis? The peak of such an axis cannot be any kind of place one could come to travelling in the world.

Then, there seems to be another shift, because now the spectators apparently see what is under the universe, since they see Ananke holding the spindle. How is it possible, if the surface of the circles is what they see and the surface of the cross-section must have been much wider than the bottom of the universe which lies on the knees of Ananke? Another thing is that the

Morrison, op. cit., p. 66).

¹⁹ Adam claims that the first point of view is from the surface of the earth and the second is from the center of it. Stewart, Heath and Richardson disagree and maintain that there is no change in point of view, because the phrase $\kappa\alpha\tau\grave{\alpha}\ \mu\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\sigma\upsilon\ \tau\grave{\omicron}\ \phi\acute{\omega}\varsigma$ can be interpreted simply as “in the light”, without further specifications as to where this place actually is. See note 13.

circles are the planets of the universe, so they must be immense. One puzzling thing is how they can see them as huge as they must be (perhaps the soul without a body may have a better perception), but another problem is how can they see Ananke? Either the surface is transparent, as it might be the case in the previous passage, but, then, what about the colours they see? Or Ananke must be really immense, bigger than the universe itself. And even if she is, how can they see the shaft lying on her knees, if it is in the center of the smallest circle? The vision of Er is impossible to imagine, especially, from his observation point.

Plato adds that they saw also eight Sirens walking on the surface of the spheres and making harmonious sounds. Do the Sirens walk on the surface of the flat cross-section? If so, the idea of hemisphere must be abandoned (for the idea of transparent spheres) or suddenly the whole image is just turned upside down and the Sirens walk upon the spheres, which had lied previously on the knees of Anake. They could also walk inside the sphere, on the surface of the cross-section. Or perhaps these are no longer hemispheres, but complete spheres, upon which the Sirens can walk. Whichever of these contradictory solutions we choose, there must be some change in Er's point of observation, so that he could see all of that. And, again, is the surface of the cross-section where people live, is it our earth, being the smallest circle, and do we live on the lower side of it or at the upper side? And what about the earth being a sphere? Do the Sirens walk on the same earth, where we live, or in some other place? For these questions we find no answers in the text itself.

Another detail of this vision is the three Moiras sitting around the universe in equal intervals on their thrones. Lachesis, Cloto and Atropos have no place to sit unless it be outside the whole universe and their thrones must be imagined to be somehow suspended in space. They cannot possibly be in the world, like the Sirens appear to be, so they must be around the whole cosmic sphere. This sphere lies upon the knees of their mother, Ananke, and they surround it. Again, how could Er see all of them at once? His sight must have been larger than the width of the universe, in the first place. He also must have been outside the universe to have been able to embrace all of this cosmic picture. The three Moiras do not only sit there and watch, they also move the spheres. Cloto who symbolizes the present time touches and moves the outer circle of the fixed stars, Atropos who symbolizes the future touches and moves the inner seven circles, and Lachesis who symbolizes the past moves sometimes these, sometimes others. How can it be that they literally touch these circles? Do they somehow put their hands inside the universe from outside?

After that there comes another shift, the fifth vision, which is introduced by Plato's words that when they arrived there, they had to go to Lachesis.²⁰ Where did they arrive? Most probably, to the place from which they could see the whole order of the universe, described above. And, once they have arrived there, they had to go on with the journey. But before they did, a

²⁰ *Republic*, 617d-618a.

prophet appeared who told them to choose their future lives and scattered them among the souls. It must have happened in the world, since there was a place for the life lots to be scattered, and the context of the scene evokes immediately Hades as a place for the souls. But how can it be Hades, which is in the underworld, if the prophet takes the lots from Lachesis' knees, before he scatters them? Anyway, the souls choose their future lives and after that they begin to come in order to Lachesis herself. In the last section of the myth the souls come to Lachesis and she gives them their lives and their guiding spirits. At the end of this whole section²¹ all souls fall asleep in the middle of the earth and they are woken up at midnight, by a thunder and earthquake, which make them all fly upwards to their place of birth, like shooting stars.

All of this is difficult to imagine, since the souls, having been in the world, while choosing their lots, then go as if out of the world to meet the Moiras and Ananke. They must somehow move in space around the universe and beneath it, where the throne of Ananke is. After that they enter the world again and travel through some place that resembles Hades, because there are the rivers of Lethe and Ameles in there. In the last part of the story the souls quickly fly upwards, which means that they must have been somewhere under the earth, so they could have gone up to its surface, where they begin their lives. But the comparison to shooting stars leaves us rather with an impression of being under the midnight sky than that of the darkness of the underworld covered with the earth's surface.

It is rather noticeable that Plato uses a lot of spatial images here, that it is a certain "language of space" that he is speaking in this myth. From the first moment $\tau \acute{\omicron} \pi \omicron \varsigma$ is what is important for him, a place where things happen. These $\tau \acute{\omicron} \pi \omicron \iota$ do not resemble anything we know from our ordinary experience. The whole journey evokes the notion of change, marked by several shifts and each shift means that something different is seen or it is seen in a different way than before.

The transformations of space in the myth are various. There are changes between above and below or up and down, as when Er is at the top of the universe or he sees Ananke at its bottom. It is interesting that in his description of the universe in *Timaeus* Plato clearly states that the universe does not have any "up" nor "down" and these concepts are in fact irrelevant.²² Here they play a great role, which means that they cannot be taken literally. The souls descend and ascend, sometimes they are above, sometimes below, and finally they fly upwards. There are also changes between inside and outside, which come in certain sequences. We begin being inside the world, then we go outside of it, then in and out, and in and out again. Being outside is linked to seeing the nature of the universe, being inside roughly connected to moral choices. There is also an important distinction of the space within the world, where the souls belong, and where our life takes place, and the space outside the world, where the Moiras and Ananke dwell. A third type

²¹ Ibidem, 620d-621b.

²² *Timaeus*, 62c-63b.

of space transformation is the change in size. The universe and the Moiras at times appear to be vast, and at times they shrink considerably, for, example, when a prophet takes lots from their knees. Also the distance expands and shrinks in similar way, when enormous distances are travelled in an instant and relatively small ones for a long time. For example, going to the Moiras takes no time at all, while the trip to the valley of Lethe lasts for a long time and seems very tiring.

The moral teaching expressed in the myth is clear and easy to understand, so we might just ignore what happens with space. We could also say that it is a dreamlike vision, that Plato does not have to pay attention to the laws of nature and logic, since the souls are not limited by them. I think, however, that Plato deliberately created such a narrative and I would not agree that it is just some inspired trance of a poet which makes him write all this. The dreamlike, poetic descriptions are intertwined with logical and sober accounts of the moral implications of the souls' journey after death. If, then, this whole journey through unimaginable $\tau \acute{o}πo \iota$ has a meaning for Plato, what exactly could it be?

UP AND DOWN, IN AND OUT, HERE AND THERE: TRANSFORMATIONS OF AWARENESS

As I mentioned in the beginning, the death of Er and his arrival to the $\tau \acute{o}πo \varsigma \delta \alpha \iota μ \acute{o}ν \iota o \varsigma$ should be understood symbolically. Death points to a contemplative separation of the soul from the body which, in the Plato's narrative, happens literally to Er. In the *Phaedo* Plato describes a philosopher as the one who attempts to die and philosophy itself as an exercise in dying.²³ He says that this process is about keeping the soul alone (only with itself, not with the body and its perceptions) and that this state is that of purity. In the whole following passage²⁴ Plato argues that this spiritual "dying" makes the soul pure so that she could see the divine reality which itself is pure and nothing impure can have access to it. The metaphorical purity and aloneness of the soul has not so much a moral quality as a cognitive one: it is a state of awareness in which the soul can contemplate the true being.

Plato refers even to a particular spiritual exercise, because he speaks of concentrating and gathering together the soul which seems to be dispersed through the body, in its various parts and distracted by perceptions she receives. It might have been somehow connected to a practice of controlling the breath.²⁵ but it is primarily an exercise of attention and of disidentifying awareness (the soul) through meditation from its objects (perceptions, feel-

²³ *Phaedo*, 64a.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 64a-67c.

²⁵ This is what Pierre Hadot suggests. Cf. P. Hadot, *Czym jest filozofia starożytna?*, transl. P. Domański, Warszawa 2000, p. 233.

ings, images), which can make it “alone” and dwelling in itself.²⁶ Plato calls this a divine and eternal life of the soul and says that it can be partially experienced already in this life, when the soul is concentrated in contemplation of the real being and keeps itself detached from the body. The symbol of spiritual death should alert us to a contemplative meaning of the Er’s journey, since this metaphoric “dying” is for Plato a gate to a certain state of consciousness.

It is also not a coincidence that one of the main themes of the *Republic* is the purification of the soul, which enables it to see the Forms in the light of the Good, by means of intuitive noesis. Also the metaphor of journey, $\pi\omicron\rho\varepsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$, has a deep symbolic meaning. Of course, there is a literal journey of Er in this story, because he moves from one place to another, but there is also an inner journey of the soul, which is a metaphor for a spiritual transformation. Plato calls dialectical ascent of the soul a $\pi\omicron\rho\varepsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$ ²⁷ and says that it means leaving the realm of illusions, shadows and phantasms and entering the luminous realm of the true being. The $\tau\acute{\omicron}\pi\omicron\iota$ of the journey, then, can be understood symbolically as states of soul’s awareness in its ascent.²⁸ The *Republic* uses the language of place and space to describe different states of mind, for example, in the famous myth of the cave,²⁹ where an illusory state of mind is represented by the $\tau\acute{\omicron}\pi\omicron\varsigma$ of the cave, while the state of contemplation is described as going out of it and into the vast space illuminated by the light of the sun that itself is a symbol of the Good.

There is also a more superficial and literal level of the story, which seems to be an allusion to some shamanic journeys of the soul or out-of-body experiences found in some of Greek authors living before Plato³⁰ as well as in others.³¹ Such a journey of the soul in a dream, near-death experience, trance or some ecstatic vision usually is accompanied by seeing the earth and the heavens as if through the bodily eyes, but the sight seems to have an extraordinary power and supernatural possibilities of perception. The story of Er is, on the one hand, one of such stories or legends, but, on the other hand, it is not merely a story based on some actual experience that Plato might have heard of and described. There is a deep symbolical meaning of

²⁶ *Phaedo*, 67c.

²⁷ *Republic*, 532b-e.

²⁸ Biesterfeld points out that the journey of Er (a journey toward the light and into the light) is an ascent and that it has certain stages which culminate in the vision of the Forms, represented symbolically by the rainbow-like light – W. Biesterfeld, op. cit., pp. 36-39.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 514a-517a.

³⁰ Cf. E. Dodds, *Grecy i irracjonalność*, transl. J. Partyka, Bydgoszcz 2002, pp. 111-128.

³¹ Plutarch tells a story about a certain Thespesius of Soloi who experienced this kind of “near-death experience” (*De sera numinis vindicta*, 563 b-568 a). In the Thespesius’ story there are elements similar to the myth of Er, like the vision of light, bright colours and the cosmic sphere around a spindle. Proclus in his commentary on the *Republic* recounts similar cases of Aristeas of Proconnesus, Hermodorus of Clazomenae and Epimenides of Crete (*In rem publicam*, vol. 2, 113, 22 et seq.), and he mentions Democritus as the one who devoted one of his treatises to such stories (*ibidem*, 113, 6-8).

this experience, such as it may have been. For Plato, as I am going to show, the journey of Er is an inner journey of the soul, not so much a flight out of the body and above the universe as the ascent from the bodily awareness of sense-perception and illusory thinking to the contemplative awareness of the true being, which is noesis, an intuitive and direct cognition.³²

Now I am going to consider what is the meaning of spatial language in this spiritual journey. Plato uses two pairs of opposite spatial relations: up and down. At the symbolic level they mean states of the soul. "Down" means usually the body and the type of awareness associated with it, where the soul is not free, is imprisoned in illusions, living in darkness, sinful and unhappy. "Up" means the pure state of the soul, its freedom from the body and the awareness of the truth. For Plato, the spiritual development of the soul is always a way up and the Good is on the top as the end of the journey, like the sun shining upon everything that is under it. Thus, in this terms, vision "from above" means a contemplative apprehension of the true nature of things.

There is also another pair of opposites, inside and outside, which are a bit more complex. The true self of the soul is the inmost self, the hidden center of its being, while the sensible world of shadows is external to it. This follows from the mentioned fragment of the *Phaedo*, where the soul has to withdraw from the external objects and from the body in order to concentrate itself. The movement outwards is the ordinary movement of the soul interested in the world, which makes it forget about the real self. The inward movement of concentration is a movement towards self-knowledge and to being truly and alone itself.

Er begins in the $\delta\alpha\iota\mu\acute{o}\nu\iota\omicron\varsigma\ \tau\acute{o}\pi\omicron\varsigma$, being in the center of the universe, but also centered in himself, as if in the depths of his soul. The judges sitting in the middle might be an allegory of the rational power of the soul that judges sense-perceptions and thoughts. The judgement in the narrative is external, because the souls bear their sentences behind them or before them, while going up or down, right or left. But this judgement is also a symbol of the inner judgement of conscience, which is self-knowledge enabling the soul to see its own sins or good deeds. The good deeds are clear and knowable, because they are in front of the soul, the evil deeds are on the back, they are not seen, hidden, because an evil soul hardly recognizes its own condition and evil is following its steps as if from behind. The heaven, where the just go, is a higher state of awareness which a soul enters, when it is purified from the body by moral life, and hell is the state of sin and unhappiness, which the unjust suffer either on this earth, or after death.

³² The distinction I am trying to make is not usually found in scholarly interpretations of the myth. The Er's experience might be, on the one hand, a vision of the universe performed by empowered senses. Then he would actually perceive the spheres and the mythical goddesses in a dream-like state of consciousness. On the other hand, however, we might treat all these images and figures as pure symbols of the reality which was not perceived by means of the senses but "seen" noetically and then "translated" into the language of symbols. By the way, these two ways of seeing might as well coexist in Plato's scheme of things and need not to exclude one another.

The second, cosmic vision of Er is much more complex. It has no moral teaching. It is a vision of the universe, which, in terms of the contemplative journey of the soul, can refer to a cosmic consciousness, a state of seeing the universe in its true nature. And so it seems to be, because this vision reveals to Er the whole structure of the cosmos. First, he goes up, which means the spiritual ascent and this ascent enables him to see the light that bounds the universe. The symbol of light would not be used by Plato accidentally at the end of the *Republic*, where the Good was called the sun and compared to light, while the darkness of the cave symbolized the illusory life of souls. The light reveals to Er the nature of things.

It is worth noticing that in order to see the universe as a whole Er had to move outside. It seems to be contradictory to the notion of the inward turn of attention which brings the soul to its true self, but Plato seems to reconcile these two movements at this level. At this moment of Er's journey going outside does not mean getting involved in the illusory perception of the world, but, on the contrary, an expansion of consciousness. This is the image that Plato used in the myth of the cave: going out of the cave is entering the state of contemplation, which fills the soul with the clear light of noesis and makes it vast enough to see the whole. It is not incidental that Er first has to turn inwards in order to expand outwards. The inner concentration of the soul is a precondition for the contemplative widening of awareness.

In this wide awareness that is closely connected to the image of light Er experiences a cosmic vision that shows him the totality of the universe. He also sees through the world as if the world became transparent, he penetrates it into the core, seeing luminous *axis mundi*. The language of seeing through or penetrating to the core is the language of mystical *in-sight*. Er first moves out of the limited space of his previous perception and from this point of view can see into the nature of the universe. Plato speaks again about the inward movement, but at this point it has a slightly different meaning. It is not so much entering the inmost self, but knowing the essence of being which is hidden as if inside. Symbolically speaking, normally we see the surface of things, while the light enables us to see through the surface and understand the essence.

Er's vision is not merely an intensified vision of the bodily eyes. His sight is that vast that not only can he embrace the whole universe at once, but also is able to see through the diaphanous sphere of it right to the core. Plato plays with contrary directions of *ex-pansion* and *in-sight* to point out that the limitations of material space has been transcended by Er. What is fascinating here is that Er sees the universe as if he were at the very center of the world and, at the same time, as if the world were in him. It is not without reason that it is the $\varphi \tilde{\omega} \zeta \acute{\epsilon} \kappa \tau \omicron \tilde{\upsilon} \omicron \acute{\upsilon} \rho \alpha \nu \omicron \tilde{\upsilon}$ that enables Er to see what he sees. In this vision the inside and outside become one.³³

³³ Hilda Richardson (pp. 126 and 128-129) points out that the common nature of the center and the periphery seem to be important in the Pythagorean conceptions of the cosmic fire, that is, the world-soul. The same fire/light of the soul is at the same time in the very center and embraces the whole universe. I would go much further saying that at the level of material space, the center and the periphery can have the same *nature* (fiery or luminous), but cannot

After that Er beholds the inner structure of the universe. It is a sphere, but the sphere suddenly changes into a spindle of hemispheres or perhaps the sphere becomes diaphanous. Anyway, Er can see Ananke sitting under the universe and the eight circles of planets revolving around the cosmic spindle. He is no longer seeing the light, but he is now in the light. Er's contemplative knowledge seems to increase at this point of ascent and this makes him see further details. He sees the circles of planets, but it does not prevent him from seeing also Ananke sitting under the universe. In material space this is not impossible, but Plato uses space in a symbolic way. The description deliberately blurs distinctions between spheres, hemispheres or circles, and we are not sure where is Er's observation point. Plato does not make this all impossible to imagine just to irritate the reader, he rather tries to point out that it is not a vision of the eyes, but that of the soul. This vision transcends the limits of material space, but also creates a peculiar space of its own. Plato consciously violates the laws and logic of material space in order to show that awareness itself is a kind of space, but in the state of contemplation the space of awareness transcends rough divisions into up and down or in and out.

Then Er seems to reach a higher level of contemplation, when he does not see the universe as such, but rather the Moiras who dwell beyond it. In the second vision the focus was the universe, but in the third one it is different. It worth noticing that for Plato there is no place literally outside the universe, since it is everything that is. When he speaks about something outside of it, he refers to a dimension, which is beyond the world not spatially, but metaphorically. The Moiras, as well as Ananke, dwell not in a physical space, but in a spiritual space belonging to the gods. This space or rather dimension is symbolically said to be outside, around, above or under the universe, but Plato makes sure that we cannot imagine it in material terms, so that we could transcend all space relations. This is why he violates them. For example, the Moiras can do the impossible and reach out to move the inner circles of planets, not because they are outside, but because they are in the divine dimension beyond space and time. Their influence is only symbolically depicted as touching and moving.

At this point the third pair of opposites, here and there, are most visibly transcended, because the Moiras seem to be sometimes very close and sometimes very far from Er's point of view. At this level of contemplation there is no here, no there, there is no distance between things. We can see it in all these transitions from the world to the Moiras and back to the world. It is not only here and there that are suspended, but also inside and outside. The lots of the souls are scattered, which means they are scattered somewhere in the world, in Hades perhaps, but immediately after that the souls go to the Moiras and to Ananke herself, which means that they are outside the world. Not only are they outside, but they are beyond spatial and time

be literally *the same* τὸ πᾶσι. It can happen, however, at the level of the inner space of awareness, where the deepest center of the soul is at the same time penetrating and surrounding the whole universe, being its center, axis and "the girdle of the heavens" (τὸ φῶς ξύνδεσμον τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, *Republic*, 616c).

limits, since they can go from one Moira to another, and we remember that they sit around the world.

Again, Plato says that the soul must in a way move inwards in order to move outwards. It was like that, when Er had to go to the center so that he could embrace the whole world. Now the souls must turn inwards (scattering of the lots) in order to go beyond the universe, where the Moiras dwell. It seems to me that the realm of the Moiras means the highest dimension of reality, a place of the divine being, symbolically embodied in the Moiras and their Mother. It is the highest point or $\tau\acute{\omicron}\pi\omicron\zeta$ of the journey, since from that place the souls can go only back, down and in the world, to Hades. Finally, the last movement is coming back to the soul, but in its "contracted" state of awareness and Plato speaks about losing knowledge by means of drinking from the mythical rivers of Lethe and Ameles. After that the souls fly outwards and upwards to their place of birth. Here it does not mean the expansion of awareness, as before, but the external movement towards the world of senses, forgetting one's nature and entering the cave again. Er goes outside, but not in a contemplative sense, but only to find himself lying on the pyre, in his ordinary state of consciousness.

There seem to be three important dimensions or $\tau\acute{\omicron}\pi\omicron\iota$ in this contemplative journey through the space of awareness. First, there is a Hades-like place, which, at the beginning, is the place of the judgement, later, it is a place where the lots are scattered and, finally, it is a place where the souls go with their lots in order to prepare for their next incarnations. This dimension is inside the world, tends to be at the middle of it and has strong moral implications. It is there, where judgments and choices are made. The symbolic meaning of these places or place can be the inner space of the individual soul which is the beginning of the journey, the first step in contemplation.

Second, there is the dimension of cosmic consciousness, that is, the world-soul. This is a place which enables Er to embrace the universe within him, being at the very center of it. Cosmic consciousness reveals the universe as a whole, as well as its inner structure and dynamics, the nature and cause of its movements. It has no moral aspects, it is purely contemplative knowledge in the sense that the true being is perceived. What Er sees here is not the ordinary world of senses at all. It only resembles it, but in fact it transcends space and time. The soul in contemplation sees the world's eternal and incorporeal nature, which for Plato is the world of the Forms, the world outside the cave. In this vision, Plato suggests, the cosmos is seen inside the sphere of awareness as one object, while the opposites of up and down, in and out, here and there begin to become one. There is also a divine light as the symbol of awareness and the image of transparency, which points to a contemplative penetration of the essence.

Third, there is the highest dimension, where Ananke and the Moiras dwell. It is even "wider" than the cosmic vision, because Er must embrace more with his sight to see not only the world, but also the goddesses around and under it. Contemplation is no longer focused on the nature of the uni-

verse, but on the divine beings. The third vision is transcendental, which means that the world is not the primary object. The symbol of space is used a bit differently here. For example, the fact that Ananke is under the world does not mean that she is “down there”, in the illusion and sin, but that she is the ground of being, the cause and the supreme source of the world nature. The symbol of below has changed its meaning. The Moiras, who are outside and around, are both governors and protectors, the daughters of Ananke, but their being outside is not so much embracing the world as transcending it by divine superiority.

At this third level of contemplation the souls meet the Moiras. This symbolic meeting means also facing the destiny they had chosen. When the vision is completed, the souls come back into the world, as if entering the first level of contemplation again. The third dimension is not a moral one, it is cognitive like the second, because the soul see the principles of the universe, the immutable laws that influence its life, although it can also choose its own condition. The souls, having come back to the first level in the middle of the world, fly upwards to the surface of the earth, which means symbolically that they forget themselves and begin a life in the cave of the illusory perception, in the body. The entire journey is over, when the soul of Er comes back to the body and his ordinary awareness and cognition is restored.

As I showed, the journey of Er is a journey of contemplation described in the symbolic language of space. What Plato tries to say in this language? First, it seems that he wants to show that cognitive awareness is a kind of space and the contemplative dimensions of it have their own, peculiar kind of space, which is different from the material one. For most of the time the typical relations of up and down, in and out, here and there are preserved, but they are transformed. For example, the material world metaphorically shrinks, when Er sees it as a whole. Second, the contemplative ascent is marked by some important shifts. The soul has first to go inwards, to the center of awareness, but once it has reached its center at the first level of contemplation, it finds itself high above everything and embracing everything. This movement in and then out seems to be a fundamental rhythm of contemplative journey. Paradoxically, the more the soul turns inwards, the more vast and spacious it becomes and the more it can hold within. This movement resembles a spiral on which the soul goes in and out, in and out, until finally the “in and out” are transcended in the highest realm of being.

Δαίμωνιος τόπος: WHAT DID ER REALLY SEE IN HIS JOURNEY?

In this paper I have proposed an interpretation of the Myth of Er as a symbolic description of a contemplative experience, which employs a peculiar language of space. Giovanni Reale writes that Plato’s myths can always be translated into purely conceptual framework, and that all they are is just

an imagery presentation of Plato's theory.³⁴ The Myth of Er could be explained in terms of an eschatological story, proving that the soul must be judged after death and, therefore, should make rational choices about its future life, if it wants to gain true happiness.

Kathryn A. Morgan in her recent book strongly disagrees with this approach. As I mentioned in the introduction, she sees *mythos* as at least equal to *logos*, dynamically intertwined. But she also claims that Plato's myths of the soul lead to a moment of experience which transcends discourse. She writes: "Middle period myths give a synoptic view of reality. They are connected with philosophical intuition and with the unmediated perception of reality that is the goal of the philosophical quest. They do not reveal reality, but act as a model for this ultimate experience."³⁵ Morgan also emphasizes the apophatic aspect of this "ultimate experience" (be it the experience of the Good or the self-awareness of the soul detached from the body), saying that "the Myth of Er has no claim to accuracy, but it can provide us with an analogue for the unimaginable internal benefits of the soul that pursues philosophy. [...] The image of the god Glaukos works negatively by suggesting accretion and mutilation, but as a result, we are left with no positive image of the purified soul."³⁶

The interpretation which I presented in this article also refers to this "ultimate experience" of philosophy, which is not a discursive analysis but a direct, intuitive awareness beyond words ("the unmediated perception of reality", in Morgan's own words). Yet I would like to point out that, although this experience is ineffable, Plato attempts to describe it as accurately as possible in the myth. The symbolic language of space seems to be a way to describe the experience, but it has to be "de-coded" or "de-ciphered".

First, if space is taken literally in this myth, it leads to contradictions and difficulties in understanding, which can be resolved perhaps only by saying that myths and dreams need not to follow any logic at all. Yet the Myth of Er does follow a logic, if only we understand space as a symbol for contemplative awareness. The image of a journey through this space stands for a philosophical exercise in inner concentration and the contemplation of the divine realm of being.³⁷

My claim would be that the language of space expresses the fact that cognitive awareness in Plato's philosophy is experienced as a space in which all objects of cognition are placed. Plato never said literally that the soul is a space, but he clearly suggested it. In the *Timaeus* Plato pictures the world-soul as a sphere and says that God created it as consisting of eight concentric spheres or circles, which move in opposite directions.³⁸ As we

³⁴ G. Reale, *Historia filozofii starożytnej*, v. II, transl. E.I. Zieliński, Lublin 1996, pp. 108-109.

³⁵ K.A. Morgan, op. cit., p. 185.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 207.

³⁷ P. Hadot certainly acknowledges the contemplative meaning of the image. Cf. P. Hadot op. cit., pp. 258-264 and *La terre vue d'en haut et le voyage cosmique*, in: J. Schneider, M. Léger-Orine, *Frontières et conquête spatiale. La philosophie à l'épreuve*, Dordrecht 1988, pp. 31-40.

³⁸ *Timaeus*, 36b-d.

see, it is almost exactly what he says about the universe in the Myth of Er. Later on, in the same dialogue, Plato says that both the universe and the soul are spheres, and that the universe is inside the soul, which contains and embraces it as if from the outside, and they share the same center.³⁹ Since the soul is immaterial, Plato could not possibly mean here that the soul contains the world in some physical manner as a vessel contains wine. It must have been a way of saying that the whole universe is a unified object in the soul's awareness, which is based on a contemplative experience in which the world is "felt" inside the self.⁴⁰ Plato speaks also about an individual soul as a smaller image or even a part of the world-soul. He says that its inner movements, which symbolize its intelligent activity, should be harmonized with the circular movements of the universal soul.⁴¹ It is, however, not clear whether a contemplative experience of widening the soul's awareness can be expressed in terms of unity between the world-soul and the individual soul, but it seems to be so in the Myth of Er, where by entering the light he participates in the world-soul's vision (ἰδὲ εἶν κ α τ ᾶ μ ἔ σ ο ν τ ὀ φ ῶ ς).⁴²

Earlier in the *Republic*, the soul contaminated by the body is described as "small", whereas it is contrary to the true state of the soul's awareness, which is "expansive" by nature⁴³. Smallness versus expansion is an example of the language of space used for the soul. In my interpretation of space

³⁹ Ibidem, 36e-37d.

⁴⁰ A description of such a mystical experience can be found, for example, in the poem *Widzenie* by A. Mickiewicz:

Ziemię i cały świat, co mię otaczał,
Gdzie dawniej dla mnie tyle było ciemnic,
Tyle zagadek i tyle tajemnic,
I nad którymi jam dawniej rozpaczał,
Teraz widziałem jako w wodzie na dnie,
Gdy na nią ciemną promień słońca padnie. [...]
I w pierwszym, jednym, rozlałem się błysku
Nad przyrodzenia całego obrazem;
W każdy punkt moje rzuciłem promienie,
A w środku siebie, jakoby w ognisku,
Czułem od razu całe przyrodzenie.
Stałem się osią w nieskończonym kole,
Sam nieruchomy, czułem jego ruchy; [...]
I byłem razem na okręgu koła,
Które się wiecznie rozszerza bez końca
I nigdy bóstwa ogarnąć nie zdoła."

(A. Mickiewicz, *Wybór pism*, Warszawa 1952, pp. 86-87). The whole poem is filled with symbols similar to those in the myth of Er. Mickiewicz was familiar with Platonic philosophy as well as with other Western mystical traditions which he may have taken these images from.

⁴¹ *Timaeus*, 90c-d.

⁴² Richardson in her article proves that the light/fire in the myth of Er is most probably a metaphor for the world-soul (pp. 127-129), so it is very probable that the whole contemplation described there symbolically is an effect of the temporary union with the world-soul. Richardson also emphasizes similarities between the myth of Er and the *Timaeus* in this particular case.

⁴³ ἐναντιώτατον γάρ που σμικρολογία ψυχῆ
μελλούση τοῦ ὅλου καὶ παντὸς ἀεὶ ἐπορέξεσθαι θείου τε
καὶ ἀνθρωπίνου (*Republic*, 486a).

transformations, they are not easily replaced by conceptual framework of Platonic metaphysics and epistemology, but they somehow reflect the actual experience. It may not be enough to say that the widening or expanding of the soul means that she gains some philosophical knowledge of the truth, because this widening is also a metaphor for something that seems to happen subjectively in the experience. This philosophical experience of the inner journey leads the soul to the $\delta α ι μ ό ν ι ο ς τ ό π ο ς$, the sacred space that is not physically "out there", but in our deepest self, where we finally find all things.