PLATO'S CHORAL THEATER IN THE *REPUBLIC*

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Abstract

In this paper I explore certain aspects of Plato's engagement with song-and-dance performances as theatrical practices.[1] As we know, Greek theaters hosted song-and-dance shows that were not limited to drama. For instance, the theater of Dionysus hosted dithyrambic performances, a quintessentially lyric genre. Here I will be using the term *theater* primarily as a deep cultural structure that splits and at the same time links the functions of viewing and being viewed; in other words, I will assume that the concept and function of *theatron* is operative even when theater as a built venue is absent. My general thesis is that Plato has a double strategy regarding *theatron*, which has important consequences for the way he handles song-and-dance performances. On the one hand he explicitly or implicitly attacks his contemporary theatrical culture. On the other hand, however, he himself stages quite strange spectacles that are evocative of song-and-dance performances; at the same time, he sets up quite peculiar spectatorships as well. In all of these cases, while elaborating on theater as a deep structure, he completely alters the forms of theatrical attendance of his time by way of fantasies that are vaguely reminiscent of, and at the same time at odds with, contemporary theatrical culture.
I will focus on one such case of strange song-and-dance spectacle, that of the tenth book of the *Republic*. More specifically I am referring to the section of the myth of Er that extends between 614a and 617d and I will discuss the parts that in my view are absolutely relevant to what I call *Plato's choral theater*.

Keywords: Choral Theater, Plato, Performance.

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1 This publication is a slightly modified part of a chapter in a forthcoming monograph. I delivered two different shorter versions of this paper at Université Paris Nanterre, in October 2022 for the conference on Plato and Greek Lyric and online for the conference on Choralities: Dance and Music from Antiquity at the Universidade de Brasília, in December 2024.

Resumo

Neste artigo, exploro certos aspectos do envolvimento de Platão com performances de canto e dança como práticas teatrais. Como sabemos, os teatros gregos apresentavam espetáculos de canto e dança que não se limitavam ao drama. Por exemplo, o teatro de Dionísio apresentava performances ditirâmbicas, um gênero essencialmente lírico. Aqui, usarei o termo "teatro" principalmente como uma profunda estrutura cultural que divide e, ao mesmo tempo, conecta as funções de ver e ser visto; em outras palavras, assumirei que o conceito e a função do theatron são operativos mesmo quando o teatro como um local construído está ausente. Minha tese geral é que Platão tem uma estratégia dupla em relação ao theatron, o que tem consequências importantes para a maneira como ele lida com performances de canto e dança. Por um lado, ele ataca explícita ou implicitamente sua cultura teatral contemporânea. Por outro lado, porém, ele próprio encena espetáculos bastante estranhos que evocam performances de canto e dança, ao mesmo tempo, também estabelece expectativas recepcionais bastante peculiares. Em todos esses casos, ao elaborar o teatro como uma estrutura profunda, ele altera completamente as formas de participação teatral de sua época por meio de fantasias que lembram vagamente a cultura teatral contemporânea e, ao mesmo tempo, estão em desacordo com ela.

Vou me concentrar em um desses casos de espetáculo estranho de canto e dança, o do décimo livro da República. Mais especificamente, refiro-me à seção do mito de Er que se estende entre 614a e 617d e discutirei as partes que, a meu ver, são absolutamente relevantes para o que chamo de "teatro coral" de Platão.

Palavras-chave: Teatro Coral, Platão, Performance.

Novel spectacles: an alternative framing for the *Republic*

Plato's *Republic* is framed by two significant journeys. It starts with the narrative of a journey from Athens to Piraeus.[1] It ends with the narrative of a postmortem journey, that of Er.[2] Both narratives are recounted by Socrates. Both narratives are stylistically complex, each one in its own way. Both narratives involve a type of visual experience that can be better understood and appreciated within the broader realm of what the Greeks called *theôria*, i.e. a journey that aims at perceptive, ritually informed, viewing.[3] This subtle ring composition is a notable structural feature with broader ramifications for our understanding of the *Republic*.[4] For the purposes of the present study I will discuss a corollary aspect of it: the way this responsion between the opening and the closing of the *Republic* helps us recognize the broader scope of Plato's choreographic thinking.[5]

Above all, *theôria* means "viewing", "observing", and regardless of whether it takes the form of an official delegation representing a polis to an extraterritorial religious event or it is practiced more casually as an individual's personal and unofficial initiative to visit such an event, the visual component and purpose of the journey is of paramount importance. This is precisely what a reader encounters in the beginning of the *Republic*. In the course of one sentence, well-known in antiquity for its polished style, Socrates tells us in the first person that the previous day he went down (*katebên*) to Piraeus with Glaucon to pray to the goddess and to watch (*theasasthai*) how the festival was done, since it was held there for the first time.[6] The goddess, who is not named at this point, is the Thracian goddess Bendis.[7] Socrates adds that he thought the procession of the locals was nice but no less impressive was the one set up by the Thracians. He then mentions that after he and Glaucon had made their prayers and seen the spectacle (*theôrêsantes*), they were about to begin their return to the city.[8]

The *Republic* thus begins with a mesh of references to the spectacles offered at a festival held at the port-town of Athens, Piraeus, with the marked verb *theôrein* includ-

1 *Resp.* 327a-328b

2 *Resp.* 614b-621b

3 On the various nuances of the term *theôria* see Rutherford (2013) 4-6. On *theoria* in the *Republic* see Nightingale (2004) 74-77.

4 The structural frame of the *Republic* often mentioned in Platonic scholarship is of a slightly different kind: it emphasizes the themes of *katabasis* (going down/descending) in the first and tenth books, with the allegory of the cave in book seven playing an intermediate role. For variations on this basic scheme see, for instance, Rosenstock (1983) esp. 220-226; Burnyeat (1997); Barney (2011); Oki-Suga (2019). The theoric character of the respective journeys in the first and tenth books, which is of primary importance for the present discussion, is not discussed in these approaches.

5 On other aspects relevant to this opening and closing of the *Republic*, and especially on its relationship to the main philosophical argument of this work see Nightingale (2004) 77-138.

6 *Resp.* 327a. For the anecdote regarding the tablet found after Plato's death containing the first sentence of the *Republic* composed by him in different ways see Dion. Hal.Comp.25; see also Burnyeat (1997) 4-5.

7 On the Thracian goddess Bendis and her cult in Athens see Parker (1996)170-175.

8 *Resp.* 327b

ed in its wording. More importantly, we are soon made to expect even more exciting spectacle to take place later that day. If Socrates and Glaucon accept Polemarchus' invitation to spend time at his family's residence in Piraeus instead of returning to Athens, they will be able to enjoy more festivities scheduled for that evening and night. The first of these scheduled events, we learn, is a torch race on horseback to be held early in the evening, i.e. horse riders passing torches to one another while racing, a novel ritual, as Socrates claims, that seems to intrigue him; the second is a *pannuchis*, an all-night festival, that Polemarchus characterizes as "worth watching" (*axion theasasthai*).[9] Whether because of the spectacular nature of the scheduled twilight and nocturnal events or because of the additional promise made by Polemarchus that at the festival's venue there will be young people to meet and converse with, or, perhaps, because of both, Glaucon suggests that they accept the invitation and Socrates concurs.[10] The rest of the ten books of the *Republic* is nothing but the ensuing longwinded philosophical conversations that presumably took place in Polemarchus' residence. The prospect of watching the spectacular, open-air, evening and nocturnal events at the festival never comes up again in the course of the *Republic's* ten books. A reference in passing to the festival of Bendis at the end of the first book does not include mention of these events.[11]

My claim is that a key section of the last part of the tenth book of the *Republic* operates as Plato's substitute for this still pending and hitherto unfulfilled promise for dusk-to-dawn spectacle.[12] At last, a most spectacular sightseeing awaits the reader of the *Republic* here, at the finale of this extensive work. Its central figure is Er, a Pamphylian soldier who was slain in battle but, as we learn, revived the day of his funeral. Er offers a detailed account of his postmortem journey, which is reported by Socrates in a remarkably lengthy and masterly indirect speech.[13]

Er's account is initially (and playfully) presented as an *apologos*, explicitly similar to Odysseus' account of his adventurous journey, in Alcinoos' palace.[14] For Plato's contemporary readers, however, the narrative of Er's journey must also have evoked, quite effortlessly, traditional practices of extraterritorial theoric journeys. For one thing, unlike the narrative of Odysseus' *nostos*, for whom each new adventure represents yet another delay of his arrival at the desired destination, i.e. his hometown, the focal point and great interest of Er's postmortem journey is, quite on the contrary, the remotest heavenly destination to which he apparently describes himself as traveling. Interestingly, the purpose of this journey, as specified for him by the judges of the underworld before his departure, is to "become the messenger to mankind of

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9 *Resp.* 328a

10 *Resp.* 328b

11 *Resp.* 354a

12 On a different approach see Nightingale (2004) 75: "The philosophic journey towards Justice, then, interrupts and supplants the *theoria* of the festival". Nightingale suggests that the quest for a philosophical understanding of justice throughout the *Republic* (and especially in books v-vii) can be considered a continuation of the theme of *theoria* in the opening of the work on a different, philosophical, level.

13 On this long *oratio obliqua*, its Platonic background, and its stylistic effect, see Halliwell (2007) esp. 449-50.

14 *Resp. 614b.* On Er's myth as one that "on one level can be read as philosophically transfigured Odyssey" see Halliwell (2007) 447-448. On the myth of Er and the *Odyssey* see also Destrée (2019); Destrée (2020) esp.569-577.

things in the hereafter and to listen to (*akouein*) and watch (*theasthai*) everything in that place", a task that, its aggrandizing rhetoric put aside, fits perfectly a significant portion of the duty assigned to official theoric delegations, i.e. their observational function.[15] Most tellingly, Plato explicitly evokes practices familiar to all those who had experienced actual theoric journeys in a section where Er's soul is described as encountering the souls arriving at the meadow (the meeting point of the underworld, as it were) "in a steady stream, looking as if they have come from a long journey, and *encamping as if at a festival* (*hoion en panêgyrei kataskênasthai*) while greeting one another".[16] This description would have certainly sounded very familiar to people on actual pilgrimages in Plato's era who evidently went through similar routines over their theoric journeys.[17] Along with other scattered evidence about the practice of encampment at festivals, a lost play by Aristophanes, of which some fragments survive, was actually entitled *Women Claiming Tent-sites* (Σκηνὰς Καταλαμβάνουσαι); it has been suggested that the play may have involved a competition of women with men over tents temporarily erected, most likely at a theatrical festival.[18] Be that as it may, it is legitimate to assume that the content of Er's narrative so far would have encouraged ancient readers to expect some kind of theatrical show coming up in the following sections of the myth.

It has been suggested that in what follows Er witnesses a type of theatrical spectacle. Andrea Nightingale, for instance, describes Er as watching "the newly dead souls being judged for their performance on earth and then rewarded and punished—he sees, in short, the winners and losers in the game of life." She also suggests that watching "the souls who have returned from heaven and hell choose their next life" evokes drama, especially with the inclusion in the narrative of the souls of famous characters such as Ajax, Agamemnon, and Odysseus.[19] This latter part of the myth of Er, namely the description of the process whereby the souls pick the lots that will determine their next lives, has widely been read as suggestive of theater.[20]

These are certainly important aspects of Er's postmortem *theoria* and there is no question that they come with some allusion to theater. My reading, however, points in a different direction: A real phantasmagoria is awaiting Er in the heavens, a spectacular extravaganza that has long been ignored in scholarship for its choreographic ingenuity and its theatrical, indeed operatic, effects. My claim is that this key section of the last part of the tenth book of the *Republic* is the one that operates as Plato's substitute for the still-pending (from the first book of the *Republic*) dusk-to-dawn spectacle.

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15 *Resp.* 614d

16 *Resp.* 614e

17 On theoric journeys see Rutherford (2013) 174-191. On *panegyris* as a term for a "panhellenic festival" see Nightingale (2004) 76.

18 Henderson (2007) 343 supports the interpretation I mention here, i.e. that the comedy referred to the tents erected by spectators who lack accommodation at festivals. On this and alternative approaches to the plot of this comedy see Bagordo (2020) 9-10.

19 Nightingale (2004) 77.

20 See for instance Halliwell (1988) 189; Destrée (2012) 120-24.

A cutting-edge choral ensemble

As we saw in previous chapters, theoric journeys involved a variety of activities. Significantly, these activities would include either performing at the destined location as a member of the traveling theoric chorus; or, attending to a song-and-dance show presented by a local chorus, namely one consisting of inhabitants of the current destination place.[21] The most famous case of a local chorus performing for *theoroi* is the chorus of the Delian maidens, about the excellence of which we hear as early as the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, with evidence about this renowned chorus' performances continuing even into Hellenistic times.[22] In Er's narrative, I suggest, Plato elaborates on precisely this aspect of a theoric journey, namely the activity of *theoroi* watching a local chorus perform. As it turns out, this "local" chorus, the chorus that "resides" at the place of Er's destination, is an extraordinary female chorus as well.

Here is what we learn from Er's narrative, as re-narrated by Socrates. After spending seven days in the meadow, where the souls had encamped, each group of the souls had to move on. After four days of walking, "they arrive at a place from where they could see clearly a straight shaft of light stretched out from above, through the whole of the sky and the earth like a pillar, closely resembling a rainbow, but brighter and purer."[23] The imaginary impact of this view, an expansive luminous rainbow-like band, stretched through the sky and the earth operates as the visual overture for the spectacle that follows. We soon learn that in another day of walking Er reached what turns out to be an astonishing choral construction, the description of which is extensive and quite complicated.[24]

Before we examine the way that Greek song-and-dance imaginary is incorporated and at the same time altered in the postmortem choral world Er witnesses, an overview of its scheme would be illuminating. As it turns out, the entire choral construction is regulated by and held together from the straight beam of light Er initially saw from afar. In the middle of this beam of light, which is stretched vertically through heaven and earth, extends the spindle of Necessity;[25] eight hemispheres, the rims of which have varying widths, are likened to hollow concentric whorls and are attached to this spindle; the whole of the spindle, which is said to be turning on the knees of Necessity, rotates on the same course ; as the revolution takes place, the seven inner circles revolve gently in orbits which run counter to the direction of the whole;[26] a Siren stands on top of each of the eight revolving circles, each Siren emitting a single sound, while carried around with the revolution. In addition, three Fates, sitting round about at equal

21 Rutherford (2013) 237-43.

22 Rutherford (2013) 238.

23 *Resp.* 616b

24 *Resp.* 616c to 617d. For a brief account of this description as a choral ensemble see also Peponi (2013)18-20.

25 *Resp.* 616c.

26 A variety of terms is used to denote circular movement: περιφορά (twice) 616c; ἐπιστρέφεσθαι 616c; κυκλεῖσθαι (617a); στρεφόμενον (617a); περιφερομένωι (617a); ἐπανακυκλούμενον (617b); στρέφεσθαι (617b). I translate ἠρέμα (617a) as gently, as also in Halliwell (1988) 95; Emilyn-Jones& Preddy (2013) 473 translate it as *silently*.

distances, sing to the music of the Sirens.[27] The whole system is a splendid yet peculiar choral ensemble, which combines all the familiar components of Greek chorality: rhythmical movement, song, and musical accompaniment-- the latter is in this case vocal, not instrumental. All of these familiar components, however, are turned into odd and unfamiliar elements as they are reconfigured and incorporated into an entirely novel song-and-movement arrangement.

To start with the specifics of the vocal component, the Sirens, perched on top of each of the eight rotating hemispheres, are described as emitting a single sound (*mian phônên*), a single pitch (*hena tonon*), thus creating a concord (*harmonia*).[28] The three Fates, seated around the rotating system, sing to the *harmonia* of the Sirens (*hymnein pros tên tôn Seirênôn harmonian*), each one assigned a specific temporal realm. Clotho sings of the present, Lachesis of the past, Atropos of the future. At the same time, Clotho with her right hand helps the rotation of the outer circumference of the spindle, pausing from time to time, Atropos with her left hand does the same to the inner circles, and Lachesis with either hand alternately does both.

It is certainly impossible to reconstruct the way the description of such a musical spectacle would have been received in Plato's times, in the vibrant choral and theatrical culture of fourth-century BCE Athens. There is no question, however, that Er's description evokes associations that we know were deeply rooted in long-standing Greek choral traditions. The Sirens, for instance, were an integral part of the Greek choral imaginary. Varying in number, these demonic creatures, half birds and half women, are often represented in earlier Greek poetry as an archetypal musical model either identical or opposite to, but nevertheless often as authoritative as that of the chorus of the Muses.[29] Choruses of young women are repeatedly assimilated to, or even supposed to enact, the Sirens' voices.[30] One is prompted to imagine the Fates as well as a female trio singing in a mode broadly conceived as choral, yet with a twist. Their singing of three different temporal domains (things past, present, and future) , though strongly reminiscent of Hesiod's chorus of the Muses who sing (apparently in unison) of "what is, what will be and what was there", is at the same time quite different from them : here each Fate is assigned the song of a different temporal domain : Lachesis sings of things past, Klotho of things present, and Atropos of things future.[31] Regardless of whether we are to imagine that the three distinct temporal streams are conceived in this case as delivered contemporaneously or in succession, the Fates' mode of singing, a solo delivery for each one of them yet one contingent upon the other two, strikes one as a curious blend—it is neither purely monodic nor purely choral.

In fact, an even closer examination of the passage reveals that almost every com-

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27 *Resp.* 617b

28 For *bebêkenai* as "perched" see Adam (1902) 452.

29 Peponi (2012) 70-94 with further bibliography. Proclus discusses briefly the relationship between the Sirens and the Muses, Procl. In R. II.237.16-26.

30 Alcm. PMGF 1.96-100; PMGF 30; Pind. fr. 94b M. On an interesting but different approach to the Sirens in this passage, not accounting for their choral instantiations, see Gurd (2020) esp. 45-46. On broader philosophical aspects regarding the role of the Sirens in the Platonic corpus, including the myth of Er, see Viltanioti (2015) 87-107.

31 Hes. *Theog.*37-40. For the Fates dancing with the Graces in circular dances see Orph. H. 43.7-8 and Calame (1997) 35. On a different set of questions regarding the "harmony of the Fates" as an image of the virtuous soul in the myth of Er see Viltanioti (2015) 132-157.

mon component of Greek chorality turns uncommon in Er's description. *Harmonia*, for instance, related etymologically to the verb *arariskein* (to fit together) was indeed key to the successful performance of the Greek chorus, as the coordination of the multiple voices singing in unison was central to its aesthetics.[32] Yet in Er's narrative the Sirens create *harmonia* not by singing in unison but by emitting, each one separately, a different pitch. It has been suggested that the conception of the octave scale may underlie this Platonic depiction of the Sirens' *harmonia*.[33] Be that as it may, in the light of all available ancient evidence, this is an unusual configuration of a chorus, whose vocal activity is clearly a non-verbal one, meant to provide a wordless melody for the song of another singing ensemble, the Fates, who are themselves performing, as noted earlier, in an intermediate, semi-solo, semi- choral, mode. It is possible that the Platonic model of the two ensembles (the Sirens and the Fates) in mutual responsion echoes arrangements of divine or mortal choruses encountered in extant texts, as for instance the mourning of the Nereids in *Odyssey* 24, to which the Muses respond with their own *thrênos*, or the lament described in *Iliad* 24, where the Trojan women wail, while Andromache, Hecuba and Helen lament the dead Hector.[34] Yet the orchestrated multi-phonic performance of the two ensembles together, each member of which emits a different tone (as in the case of the Sirens) or content (as in the case of the Fates) are not to be found elsewhere in extant sources.

The kinetics of the two choral ensembles, the Sirens and the Fates, makes the uniqueness of Plato's choreography even starker. This is a striking, if not bizarre, combination of total motionlessness, on the one hand, with elements of motion, on the other. Interestingly, all figures composing the two quasi-choral ensembles, the Sirens and the Fates, are depicted in a static mode. Necessity, on whose lap we are told the spindle revolves, is presumably sitting;[35] the singing Fates, positioned around the cosmic spindle at equal distances, are explicitly said to be sitting on thrones;[36] likewise, the eight singing Sirens are perched on the rim of each one of the eight whorl-like hemispheres, carried along by the rotation.[37] The verb *bebêkenai*, used of the Sirens' posture, is particularly interesting in this context. On the one hand *bainein*, meaning *to step*, is a verb of movement regularly encountered in dance contexts; on the other hand, the perfect tense that is used in this case presents the implied movement as completed, thus the Sirens' perching on the top of each of the rotating rims sounds like a fixed, immutable, position in eternity.[38]

Details of the positioning and kinetics of the Fates in Er's narrative are interesting as well. In Classical iconography, the Moirai (Fates) are occasionally depicted as young

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32 In Hesiod (Theog.39), the nine Muses 'fit together their voices' (φωνῇ ὁμηρεῦσαι). The chorus of the Deliades is praised for their 'beautifully fitted together (συνάρηρεν) song' (h.Ap.164). On ἁρμονία (harmony) deriving from the root found in the verb ἁραρίσκειν see Chantraine (1999) s.v. ἅρμα.

33 Barker (1984) II, n.10 and 11; Halliwell (1988) 182. On harmonia in the Republic see Petraki (2008); Pelosi (2010) esp.135-151.

34 Od. 24.57-61; Il. 24.723-775; see also Il.24.719-22.

35 Resp.617b—literally, on her knees

36 Resp.617c

37 Resp.617b

38 On the use of the verb in dance contexts see for instance Pl. Leg. 670b; [Alc.] 108c; Ar. Thesm. 956-57; Eur. Alc. 585-86; [Longinus] Subl. 39.2.4.

women working in what looks like ordinary domestic environments.[39] Weaving, along with its preparatory stages that include spinning, was certainly an ordinary female activity in the Greek household, often combined with singing, as we learn from various sources and as the Fates do in the Platonic text as well.[40] Here, however, the Fates' depiction is quite unusual. Although said to be sitting on thrones at equal distances around the spindle, their surrounding environment is unspecified, prompting the reader to wonder whether they, along with their thrones, are to be imagined as levitating in mid-air. Nevertheless, they are said to be participating in the cosmic spinning by reiterating, with the mere movement of their hands, the eternal bi-directional rotation of the spindle and the whorls. The perpetual repetition of this monotonous, quasi-programmed, motion of their hands, as described by Er, makes the Fates a key mechanical part of the overall large and composite Platonic automaton—that of the cosmos.

We will return to the choral mechanics in Er's narrative in order to tackle its interesting aesthetic ramifications but for the moment further examination of the specifics of its operation is in order. Notably, all movements that are initiated and regulated by the Fates are circular, yet we learn that the whorl-like hemispheres revolve at different velocities. The eighth is the fastest; the seventh, fifth, and sixth are next in velocity and their tempos are synchronized; the next fastest is the fourth, next comes the third, and the slowest is the second. Clearly, then, the bidirectional revolution of the spindle and the whorls along with the ranging widths and velocities of the latter create an utterly variegated moving whole.

Colors and light effects are added to this sensational variety of coordinated movement. The emphasis Plato puts on conveying slightly diverging hues and tonalities of brightness is revealing of the importance he places on the visualization of this peculiar choral scheme Er describes. The first and larger rim of the outermost whorl, Er tells us, is *poikilos*, in this context to be probably understood as multicolored, often translated into English as spangled;[41] the seventh circle is called brightest (*lamprotaton*) ; the eighth circle, we learn, takes its color from the brightness reflected from the seventh; the second and fifth are said to be of nearly the same color but blonder (*xanthotera*) than the others; the third is the one that is the whitest (*leukotaton*), while the fourth is described as reddish (*huperuthron*) and the sixth as second in whiteness (*deuteron leukotêti*).[42]

Precisely because scholarship has largely focused on the astronomical aspects of Er's narrative, commentators on this part of the *Republic* have been preoccupied with the actual identity of the celestial bodies Er alludes to, so much so that Francis Cornford added their names in parentheses in the main text of his translation.[43] In the sequence they are mentioned in the text with respect to their light and color, these bodies are to be identified respectively with the Fixed stars, the Sun, the Moon, Saturn and Mercury, Jupiter, Mars, and Venus. Certainly, the fixed stars and the planets are explicitly named in the *Epinomis*, a postscript to Plato's *Laws* that was probably composed by Philip of

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39 See, for instance, the red-figure pyxis (ca 430-420 BCE) in Würzburg, Wagner-Mus.L541, ARV², 1133, 196.

40 Karanika (2014) 28-51and 106-113.

41 See, for instance, Cornford (1941) 354.

42 *Resp.* 616e-617a

43 Cornford (1941) 354

Opus, a disciple of Plato.[44] There is a reason, however, that in Er's narrative they are never named and, what is more, are not even identified as stars, but only described as whorls (*sphonduloi*) and circles (*kukloi*).[45] This is not just because their naming would deprive the narrative of its mythical tone. More importantly, it is because in this case Plato's stress is on the peculiar chorus he crafted along with his novel choreography: what Er describes is a one-of-a-kind choral motor that, for all its astronomical subtext, it is meant to be heard and read primarily as a unique technological blending of quasi-familiar components turned unfamiliar.

The range of multicolored, whiter, yellower, reddish, and brighter rims prompts the reader of Er's narrative to imagine a breathtaking blending of movement and color as they all rotate at the same time in their distinct velocities.[46]And while Er tells us that the Fates, who are sitting at the edges of this spectacular rotating system, are themselves dressed monochromatically in pure white, its very center, namely the vertical pillar of light that holds together the entire system, is described as multicolored and bright, closely resembling a rainbow, as we saw, only brighter and purer. In other words, this musical production is nothing less than a dazzling eruption of light and color, where a stable shaft, consisting itself of multiple vertical rainbow-like stripes of several luminous colors, serves as the fixed upright pillar around which rotate, horizontally, the eight rims with their own ranging velocities and tonalities of radiance and splendor.

Nocturnes and *pannychis*

"Games of colored fires" (jeux de feux colorés) is the phrase Joseph Bidez, the Belgian classicist, employed when discussing the colors of the circles (*kukloi*) in the myth of Er, which he, like most scholars, referred to as the planets.[47] In concluding his article, published in 1935, Bidez claims that Plato had probably borrowed his description of the colors of the planets from the astronomer and mathematician Eudoxus of Cnidus and that later, when writing the *Timaeus*, he lost sight of this aspect, which is "one the most picturesque features of his fiction of the spindle of Necessity".[48] After all, Bidez continues, in the passage of the Timaeus where the creation of colors is discussed, Plato points out that the study of such a subject is of no interest to our intelligence, because explaining the composition of color mixtures involves neither a necessary cause nor a probable reason.[49]

This is certainly not the place to discuss the role of color in Plato's philosophy. For the purposes of our discussion, however, it is notable that, notwithstanding the di-

44 [Pl.] Epin.986a-987d.

45 σφόνδυλοι : 616c7; 616d1-7;616e1-9; κύκλοι: 616e1-5;617a7. Unlike the myth of Er, in the Timaeus (40b-c) the stars (ἄστρων 40b) are explicitly mentioned as such in what is described as a heavenly choreia.

46 On the colors of the planets and the fixed stars from an astronomical angle, from Mesopotamian and Pythagorean traditions to Cicero and Neoplatonism see Martijn (2022). See also Bidez (1935); Brumbaugh (1951).

47 Bidez (1935)

48 Bidez (1935) 272. Italics mine.

49 Bidez (1935) 271-72. Bidez refers to Ti.68b.

versity of views regarding the scientific grounding of Er's list of colors, an underlying aesthetic aspect is frequently mentioned in modern scholarship as one of the reasons for its existence.[50] For the reading suggested here such aesthetic consequences in Er's detailed account of the colors of the "whorls" (*sphonduloi*) or "circles" (*kukloi*), as Er himself calls them, should be evaluated and taken into account not by themselves but as part of an overall consistent scheme in the Platonic narrative. As I mentioned earlier, unlike the *Timaeus*, the *Epinomis*, or other sections of the *Republic*, Plato's avoidance of astronomical vocabulary in the myth of Er is certainly meant to spotlight the spectacle Er witnesses as an extraordinary choral event that displays a unique coordination of visual and aural stimuli. The colors of the eight rotating "circles" (*kukloi*) should be imagined together with their vocal counterpart, the eight Sirens that emit "a single sound on one note" while perched on each one of them.[51] The spectacular luminous polychromy of the "circles" is an integral part of a fully-fledged audiovisual setup.

Granted their scientific and astronomical grounding in the subtext of Er's description, I should like to think further about the colors' function in the context of the cultural imaginary that they evoke. In this respect, although Bidez himself did not reckon Er's color-list as part of Plato's heavenly choral scheme, his phrase "jeux de feux colorés" ("games of colored fires") is particularly pertinent to our reading. It sounds like an ad hoc pun on the phrase "feux d' artifice" that means "fireworks". I suspect that current cultural and personal experience were consciously or unconsciously behind the words "jeux de feux colorés" Bidez used. In any case, I should like to briefly pick up on his felicitous phrase as conjuring up visual experimentations that peaked in fin-de-siècle European culture and continued well into the first decades of the twentieth century : on the one hand the aesthetic of fireworks, a particularly popular spectacle in Europe of that period, also captured by avant-garde painting; on the other hand, the visual marvel that came under the name of the choreographer and dancer Loie Fuller.

Fireworks are transient apparitions of light, color, and movement in nocturnal skies, an art that "aspires to glow for an instant and fade away", "apparitions κατ'ἔξοχήν", as Adorno put it.[52] Above all, fin-de- siècle fireworks became part of the period's fascination with the aesthetic of the *nocturne* that, in addition to music, eventually encompassed a wide range of visual arts such as design, painting and dance. Whistler's now famous (and then provocative) "*Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*", displayed for the first time in 1877 at the opening exhibition of the Grosvenor Gallery, filled with cascading fireworks in a range of golden tonalities against the background of dark skies, is a landmark in the aesthetics of the nocturne as a genre.[53] Similarly, Loie Fuller's revolutionary choreographies appealed to the most forward-looking intellectuals in Paris, were yet another elaboration on the aesthetics of the nocturne. Emanating from the dark, Loie Fuller offered visions of all sorts of changing luminous colors with the help of a large cloth that, while reshaping itself along with her moving body, irradiated the artificial lighting designed by her as an essential component of her choreographies (Figs. 1-2).

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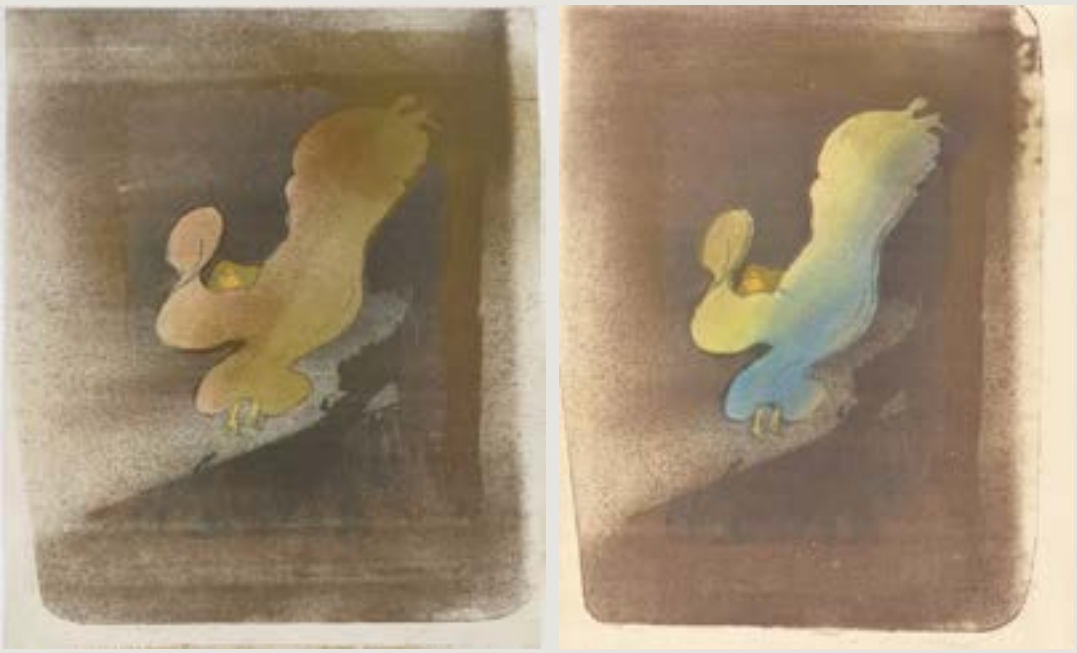
50 See, for instance, Brumbaugh (1951) esp. 175. On the colors of the planets in the astronomical tradition see recently Martijn (2022).

51 Resp. 617b. Tr. Emlyn-Jones and Preddy.

52 Adorno (1997) 28 and 81. On the aesthetics of the nocturne, fireworks, Adorno, and art see Flint (2017).

53 Spalding (1979) 102; Sutherland (2014)131-147 and 148-165.



Figs.1and 2. Loie Fuller dancing in color lithographs by Toulouse-Lautrec that capture the dynamism of color, light, and movement against a dark backdrop. National Gallery of Art (left) and Metropolitan Museum of Art (right). Wikimedia Commons.

Henry Lyonnet's description of one of her signature dances, the "Fire Dance", is particularly relevant to our discussion:

> *The Fire Dance that she had imagined was one of her spectacles which made the strongest impression on the public. After securing a total darkness in the theater, there suddenly appeared in the background of the stage a vague uncertain gleam, a sort of phosphorescence, by moments streaking with its pallid light the shadows, then little by little, this light gains a growing intensity, draws outlines, a human shape appears and seems to flatter in the air, made of immensurable wings with iridescent colorations, made of ruby, sapphire, and turquoise.*[54]

One may contemplate the iridescent dancing vision emerging from the dark with its ruby, sapphire, and turquoise shades next to the tonalities of the rotating luminous colors Er lists: "multicolored", "brightest", "yellower" or "blonder", "whitest", "slightly ruddy", "second in whiteness". No doubt, the specific colors, as well as the shapes, settings, moving substances, and above all cultural contexts, are very different. For our discussion, however, what makes the two descriptions comparable is far more important: it is the conception of choreography as an instrumentation of movement, light, and color (Fig.3). This is precisely the concept around which Loie Fuller created her dances; and this is no doubt a crucial concept around which Plato envisioned the celestial choreography in the myth of Er.

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54 For this quotation see Albright (2007) 80. For the importance of light in Loie Fuller's choreographies see Albright (2007) 51-83. See also Fuller (1913) 26 and 51-60. On Loie Fuller and the aesthetic of the nocturne see Gueden (2023).

If Loie Fuller's choreographic conception can be better understood and appreciated in view of the fin-de-siècle taste for nocturnal apparitions of light in motion, I submit that Plato's choreography can be better appreciated as a fully-fledged phantasy that elaborated on the visuality and indeed the overall sensorium of the ancient *pannychis*, the term used in Greek texts to designate a wide range of performances that took place in after-dusk festivities of all sorts. I suggested earlier that the heavenly spectacle Er describes in the tenth book of the *Republic* is Plato's splendid compensation for the pending and never materialized attendance of the *pannychis* that would take place at the Bendis festival in Piraeus, about which we hear in the dramatic setting of the dialogue in the first book of the *Republic*. We will never learn exactly how the novel (*kainon*) spectacle of torch-race on horseback was conducted by the young men or experienced by its spectators but, from the brief description we do hear, it seems almost certain that the fast movement of torch light was key to its success. If the cultural experience of the *pannychis* is indeed, as I suspect, part of the experiential background Plato elaborated on when choreographing Er's heavenly spectacle, then the lived experience of nocturnal festivities in general, beyond torch races, is something we might wish to consider. Even though our evidence for the way the various after-dusk celebrations were conducted is very limited, there is an uncontestable element we should take into account: they largely included song-and-dance events as part of scheduled or impromptu festivities.[55]

How was the movement of light experienced in the darkness or semi-darkness in such events? There should be no doubt that torches were held by at least some of the participating singing-and-dancing members. In the absence of specific testimonies about the song-and-dance events that took place in the *pannychides* of major polis festivals, such as the Panathenaia, for instance, let us turn to the occasional festive revelries that come under the name of *komos*.[56] Torches are mentioned time and again in ancient texts as an accoutrement associated with komos, though usually with no further references to the visual effects of its distinctive light.[57] Yet the fact that komastic festivities were perceived and inscribed along with the glow of the torches held in the hands of some of the participants is indeed attested as early as in the archaic period. In the long ekphrastic narrative of the pseudo-Hesiodic *Shield*, which describes the shield of Heracles, fifteen lines are dedicated to a komastic procession in a city celebrating a wedding.[58] The overall description brims with acoustic stimuli: sounds of wedding festivities are rising up; the choruses send forth their voices accompanied by shrill pipes; an echo spreads around; the sound of lyres is mentioned ; young people are performing the komastic song and dance accompanied by a pipe.[59] Interestingly, however, along with the dense references to this typically komastic din, there is also a vivid reference to the visual appearance of the festive crowd:

> *Beside them was a well-towered city of men, and seven golden gates, fitted to the lintels, encompassed it. The men were at pleasure, in revelries and choruses; some were leading a bride to her husband on a well-wheeled wagon, and a*

55 Bravo (1997) esp. 25-99; Budelmann and Power (2015) 259-273; Valdés Guía (2023).

56 On the Panathenaic pannychis and its choral events see Valdés Guía (2023).

57 Ar. Plut. 1040-41; Antiphanes.fr.197 K-A; Philostr. Imag.9.5.

58 Hes. [Sc.] 270- 285. The verb κωμάζω is used in v.281. The term χορός is used in vv. 272, 277, 284. On this scene see Russo (1950) 146-149.

59 Hes. [Sc.] 274, 277-79, 299, 280, 281. On sound in these lines see Sansom (2018) 201-204.

> *great wedding song rose up. From afar rolled the blaze of burning torches in the hands of the slaves, who walked in front, blooming in splendor, and performing choruses followed them.*[60]

The wedding celebration presents similarities with the wedding parade described in the Shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*, yet the Hesiodic poet proves more sensitive to the magic of illumination.[61] In the respective scene in the Homeric Shield of Achilles we hear in passing that the brides are carried through the city "under the shining torches", a formulaic phrase not further expanded.[62] In the Hesiodic lines, however, not only do we hear about the whirling blaze of the torches but we are also made to see its glow reflected on the figures of the maids who are carrying them : they are blooming in splendor.[63] Splendor, the Greek word *aglaia* (which has a wide range of semantic nuances depending on context) vividly captures in this case the material, visible, impact of luminosity, already underlined by the palpability of the radiant blaze (*selas*) emanating from the burning torches. Selas, used sparsely in the Hesiodic corpus, is associated primarily with the visual effect of blazing flame.[64] A modern reader cannot but treasure the cinematic manner in which the Hesiodic eye moves aptly in order to capture as much as possible from the glare in the festive parade and dance: in the space of three lines the narrator shifts seamlessly from a wide shot, whereby their rolling blaze is seen *from afar* (v. 275, *têle selas eiluphaze*), *to a close-up on the glowing figures of the servants that carry them.*

Unlike the loose and fluid movement of komastic dances as well as the diffused torch-light enveloping the dancing crowd, one would imagine that the light emanating from the torches in coordinated nocturnal choruses would have a more defined visual effect. The paucity of relevant evidence, verbal or visual, leaves us with the sole option of mere speculation, yet I should like to take advantage of a partly damaged but still suggestive lid of a pyxis found in Brauron and dated in the third quarter of the 5th century BCE.[65] It depicts four young women performing a circular dance around an altar, in

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60 Tr. G. Most slightly modified.

[...] παρὰ δ' εὔπυργος πόλις ἀνδρῶν, (270)
χρύσειαι δέ μιν εἶχον ὑπερθυρίοις ἀραρυῖαι
ἑπτὰ πύλαι· τοὶ δ' ἄνδρες ἐν ἀγλαΐαις τε χοροῖς τε
τέρψιν ἔχον· τοὶ μὲν γὰρ ἐυσσώτρου ἐπ' ἀπήνης
ἤγοντ' ἀνδρὶ γυναῖκα, πολὺς δ' ὑμέναιος ὀρώρει·
τῆλε δ' ἀπ' αἰθομένων δαΐδων σέλας εἰλύφαζε (275)
χερσὶν ἑνὶ δμῳῶν· ταὶ δ' ἀγλαΐῃ τεθαλυῖαι
πρόσθ' ἔκιον, τῇσιν δὲ χοροὶ παίζοντες ἕποντο·

61 Hom. Il.18.490-496.

62 Hom. Il. 18.492. See also Od.19.48; 23.290.

63 I depart from Most's translation of v. 276.The semantics of the adjective aglaos (and, consequently, the derivative noun aglaia) is remarkably wide but, as Chantraine (s.v) puts it, "has all the echoes that the Latin splendidus also presents". Aglaia, singular in this case (as opposed to its use in plural in the same passage, v.272), has a visual semantic nuance: it means splendor, beauty. Thus, instead of "blooming in revelry" as in Most's translation, I translate "blooming in splendor". For the difference in the semantics of the word in plural see LSJ s.v.2.

64 Selas is used in the Hesiodic corpus four times Theog.867; Fr.30.10; [Sc] 60 and 275 (the latter discussed above).

65 On this lid see Kahil (1963) 24, 27-28 and pl.23.6. See also Budelmann and Power (2015) 265-266.

the presence of a seated female flute player (Fig. 3). All four women hold small torches in both hands yet their postures differ. Two of them are depicted in frontal view with their arms extended sideways while keeping the torches in upright position; the other two, their bodies depicted in profile, hold the two torches at different heights, with the left arm in both cases more elevated.[66] Lilly Kahil points out that between the seated woman with the aulos and the woman with the outstretched arms, in the part of the lid now missing, an altar with burning fire was probably depicted with some of the red highlights of the flame still visible in the salvaged part.[67]

Fig. 3. Archaeological Museum of Brauron 276 (A 50). Photo by Anastasia-Erasmia Peponi.

The painting clearly suggests that circular rotation is here combined with a coordinated variation of posture and that torches are part of the overall choreographic scheme. Whether or not this particular instance is supposed to represent a nocturnal performance, it certainly evokes the *pannychides* associated with the cult of Artemis, to which the sanctuary of Brauron was dedicated, and prompts us to imagine similar or even more elaborate choreographies where the movement of torch light was part of

66 On the posture of the young women I closely follow Parisinou (2000) 29-30.

67 According to Kahil (1963) 24 red highlights can also be seen from the flame of the torch held by the left hand of the woman immediately preceding the musician.

the choral spectacle in after-dusk festivities (Fig.4).[68] In view of the Platonic choreography in the myth of Er, this representation is particularly interesting as it suggests two main directions of light: the vertical one in the center, i.e. the altar's burning fire with its smoke spiraling upwards; and the horizontal axis with the movement of the torches held in the hands of the dancers as they rotate around the altar. Remarkably, as we saw earlier, Plato's complex choreography involves two axes of light as well, a vertical and a horizontal: while the vertical one is described as a straight shaft of light closely resembling a rainbow, the horizontal comprises eight concentric circles of slightly different luminous colorations rotating in different velocities (the one of them in the opposite direction to the other seven).

Fig. 4. Another depiction of women with torches around an altar. Archaeological Museum of Brauron. Wikimedia Commons.

Wonders are like dreams: they deconstruct the real ingredients of one's lived experience and reconstruct them into a whole that transcends known reality. This painting is a valuable piece of evidence for our discussion in that it provides concrete testimony regarding the choreographic importance of torch light in actual choral experience. It thus helps us better grasp the possible experiential background behind Plato's choral vision in the myth of Er as well as the way his overall choreography of light and movement could have captured and reconfigured actual lived experience on a much more complex level. In addition to the basic structural similarities of the choreographic scheme in both cases, i.e. a vertical effusion of light in the middle, around which horizontal circular movements of luminous bodies take place, one may also imagine that

68 On the lid in relation to the *pannychides* associated with Artemis see Parisinou (2000) *op.cit.* with further bibliographical references.

in actual after-dusk dances, when the body of the dancing performers would be less (if at all) visible, it is the movement of their torch lights that would be conspicuous, thus transforming the spectacle as a whole into an almost abstract choreography of light.

To further explore the "period eye" (i.e. the mental equipment through which visuality operates in a given culture) I should briefly add that bodies in motion, including dancing bodies par excellence, are repeatedly described in Greek texts as emitting a marvelous bioluminescence by their mere movement.[69] Odysseus delights while looking at the sparkles emanating from the feet of the virtuoso dancers Halius and Laodamas in Alcinoos' palace; Bacchylides represents Theseus in awe while gazing at the glow radiating from the limbs of the dancing Nereids.[70] The latter case offers a particularly interesting example of how in the longue durée of Greek chorality the same conceptual apparatus of light can be used flexibly, with seamless transpositions from the diffused luminosity of the torches enveloping choruses to the luminosity emanating from the very body of the dancers. A telling example is the use of the word *selas* i.e. light, brightness, glow : In the invaluable description of the komastic choruses in the pseudo-Hesiodic Shield mentioned earlier, the word *selas* is used to depict the blaze of burning torches rolling from afar; in the Bacchylidean passage the same word, *selas*, is used to refer to the luminescence of the Nereids' limbs as they dance.

The Greek *pannychis*, with its various after-dusk events, must have decisively enhanced the imaginary potential of the linkage between movement and light that was inherent in the era's visuality in a variety of forms. Against a dark backdrop luminous phenomena increase their magic. Indeed, for a choreographically oriented mind, the moving torch flames of earthly nocturnal choruses might have provided a unique occasion to further contemplate the heavenly *choreia* of the stars, themselves conceived by Plato in the *Timaeus* as divine living bodies (*sômata*) "wrought for the most part *out of fire*" (ἐκ πυρός).[71]

To conclude: There is an unnoticed but important ring composition between the beginning and the end of the *Republic*, quite different from what has been suggested so far. I proposed that the choral phantasmagoria in the myth of Er makes up for the missed pannychis, the novel spectacle of the torch races on horse-back that we hear about in the opening of the first book of the Republic. Why has the overt chorality of these passages been largely lost to Plato's readers? This lapse is probably due to prevailing scientific and astronomical agendas that sought to excavate and bring to the fore the content that, in this case, Plato had carefully deposited in the discursive underground, in the subtext of Er's description. Apart from its unquestionable astronomical and scientific implications, the celestial choreography in Er's myth is fully attuned to a deep reservoir of cultural experience that it reenvisions and transforms into a novel tour de force.

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69 For the "period eye" see Baxandall (1988) 29-108 and esp. 40.

70 Od.8.264-265; Bacchyl. 17.101-105. I discussed rapid bodily movement perceived and depicted as light in the visual perception of dance in Peponi (2004) esp.303-306. See also Peponi (2015) 212-213; for an alternative approach see Kurke (2012) esp.228. More recently see Steiner (2021) 634-641in relation to the concept of enargeia. For a particularly interesting approach to movement as light in Greek texts (outside the realm of dance) see Scarry (1999) 77-88.

71 For the stars as bodies (sômata) see Ti. 38e-39e. For the stars made of fire (ἐκ πυρός) for the most part see Ti.40a. Although certainly very different in its psychology, the nocturnal experience of looking at the stars and at the (eventual) appearance of torch lights in the darkness is uniquely depicted in the Watchman's prologue in Aeschylus' Agamemnon (vv. 1-10). On a choral ode that juxtaposes nocturnal torches with the choreia of the starry sky see Eur. Ion 1075-1080.

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