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## FOR SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION OF SOME PASSAGES OF PLATO'S *PHAEDO*

When we read or study Plato's *Phaedo* we should find some veiled content hidden behind the artistic images and symbols. More so that Plato was aware of mystery religions and esoteric teaching.

A symbol is a key to the vast world of philosophy, mythology, literature, and art. It is a universal aesthetic category as ancient as a human mind. A symbol with the help of a figurative language reveals a mysterious implication of a literary work and makes it possible for us to understand it deeply. Shelling says that poetry is a permanent symbolization.

From the point of view of symbolic-allegoric interpretation it is very interesting to mention an observation of C. Rowe. In *Phaedo* Plato tells us: "As he said this he lowered his legs to the ground, and then remained sitting in that position for the rest of the discussion" (καὶ ἄμα λέγων ταῦτα καθῆκε τὰ σκέλη ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν, καὶ καθεζόμενος οὕτως ἤδη τὰ λοιπὰ διελέγετο (*Phaedo*, 61c10-d2).

To Rowe's mind, "Socrates' change of physical position parallels a shift in the discussion to more serious matters. He is no longer the poet, but the philosopher".<sup>1</sup>

In one of the passages *Phaedo*, the personage of the dialogue, says: "I happened to be sitting to his right, on a stool beside the bed, while [Socrates] was a good way above me" (ἔτυχον γὰρ ἐν δεξιᾷ αὐτοῦ καθήμενος παρὰ τὴν κλῆμην ἐπὶ χαμαιζήλου τινός, δεῖ ἐπὶ πολὺ

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, Rowe C. J. (ed.), Cambridge University Press 1993, 123.

ὑψηλοτέρου ἢ ἐγώ - *Phaedo*, 89b1-2). Plato deliberately notes that the philosopher was seated higher. Such allusion is not accidental. There is a symbol in sitting in a physically higher position. It reminds us the privileges of Socrates. He is spiritually superlative as well. In the present case spiritual is expressed by means of physical though physical itself derives from spiritual.

We would like to stress the peculiar function of silence in *Phaedo*. It has a symbolic meaning and at the same time it is a compositional device.

Ben Ioseb (III c.) says: "Silence is the fence of wisdom". Isaac from Syria said that speech is the weapons of our everyday life, and silence is the mystery of the future life, of the next world. When people are silent they get absorbed in themselves, mobilize their spiritual power and focus their attention. It is the preparation to gain the Logos.

Socrates' silence is meaningful too. It is not a mere pause, an automatic ceasing of the dialogue. It means that one of the stages of the dialogue is over and gives to the interlocutors a chance to think over the said... Silence makes it possible to begin the following stage of the reasoning.

Socrates told his friends the reason of a philosopher's courage. "When Socrates had said this, there was silence for a long time. To judge from his appearance, Socrates himself was absorbed in the foregoing argument, and so were most of us" (σιγή; οὖν ἐγένετο ταῦτα εἰπόντος τοῦ Σωκράτους ἐπὶ πολὺν χρόνον, καὶ αὐτός τε πρὸς τῷ εἰρημένῳ λόγῳ ἦν ὁ Σωκράτης, ὡς ἰδεῖν ἐφαίνετο, καὶ ἡμῶν οἱ πλεῖστοι - *Phaedo*, 84c1-3). The renewed conversation concerns the theory - soul as a harmony.

After Simmias and Cebes had been sure that spirit was not harmony there came silence again. "Here Socrates paused a long time examining something in his own mind" (ὁ οὖν Σωκράτης συχρὸν χρόνον ἐπισχών καὶ πρὸς ἑαυτὸν τι σκεψάμενος - *Phaedo*, 95e7-8). And that was followed by "the account of Socrates' intellectual history",<sup>2</sup> by seeking the reason of the things.

In the final passage Socrates "came and sat down, fresh from his bath, and there wasn't much talk after that" (ἔλθὼν δ' ἐκαθέζετο λελουμένος καὶ οὐ πολλὰ ἄλλα μετὰ ταῦτα διελέχθη - *Phaedo*, 116b7-8). He drains dry his cup without any hesitation; his look becomes blank and he is silent again. Now Socrates' silence is infinite.

According to Olympiodorus' statement, in Athens a condemned to death was punished only after the sunset. At the beginning of the work we

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<sup>2</sup> Gallop D. (ed.), Plato, *Phaedo*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975, 169.

learn that Socrates' life will last till dusk. Perhaps, it is a tradition and a real fact, but we think there is a symbol in it as well.

Through the entire dialogue the reader is awaiting for the dusk and therefore, he unconsciously identifies it with Socrates' death. The philosopher's death is identified with the sunset, disappearance of the light, strength, and holiness. The sun is setting and Socrates' life is coming to the end (*Phaedo*, 116b5-6).

Another passage of *Phaedo* has some symbols too. In the opening part of the work Socrates' friends gather in front of the prison, they talk and wait for the door to be opened. They visit Socrates and spend the day talking to him (*Phaedo*, 59d4-5).

Opening of the door is very important for Phaedo and his friends. The door opens; they enter and acquire the new spiritual experience. They ascend a new stage of the spiritual development. If much had been unclear and mysterious for them before, later, when the door was opened, by means of the philosophic conversation they obtained the divine wisdom.

In the world literature and art opening of a door, a gate, drawing of a curtain are the symbols of coming closer to the Divine World. They are familiar to the *Old* and *New Testaments*, the Christian Literature of the Middle Age.

The word "door" has something in common with the word of the Lord and heavenly wisdom. Jesus said: "I am the gate for the sheep" (*John*, 10. 7). In Acts when Paul and Sila were praying, suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken; all the prison doors flew open and the preaching of the word of the Lord began... (*Acts*, 16. 25-32).

In *Matthew's Testament* the curtain of the temple was torn in two, the earth shook and the rocks split. It was the sign of Jesus' resurrection. The centurion and those with him who were guarding exclaimed that surely He had been the Son of God (*Matthew*, 27. 51-54). Tearing of the temple curtain is again connected with coming closer to Truth and ascendance the new stage of spiritual development. The symbol is present in the artistic world of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. "The attendant drew back a fold of the curtains..." (342), and there comes a sudden change in Tariel's life. He falls in love with Nestan and starts seeking for his lost "divine self".

In *Mark's Testament* Jesus healed the sick and demon-possessed people who had gathered at the door (*Mark*, 1.33-34). Socrates was not only a teacher and a friend for the rest characters; he was a healer as well. The philosopher healed (ἰάσατο) them of fright and cowardice that was the

result of their ignorance. All happened after the prison door was opened (*Phaedo*, 89a5).

The door opens... behind the visible veil of the phenomenon we should notice the meaning that is concealed for the physical sight.

The study of *Phaedo* from its artistic point of view has made it clear that the dialogue meets all requirements that the most refined reader claims to a true literature work. Various poetic and oratorical devices are skillfully and perfectly used in it. Due to his gifts, fantasy and flair, the author fills them with unique charm and thoughtfulness; but each artistic device used by Plato is a way to the expression of a philosophic idea.