

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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## Imitating the Daemon: Philosophical Education and Esoteric Writing in the *Tablet of Cebes*<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The *Tablet of Cebes* is a philosophical dialogue written in the first or second century CE and traditionally attributed to Cebes of Thebes, a disciple of Socrates. It enjoyed immense popularity in Renaissance humanism and was widely read up until the late nineteenth century. However, nowadays it is rarely known even to classical scholars.<sup>2</sup> It received some attention in the second half of the twentieth century. Robert Joly has convincingly argued that references to mystery religions, which are found in the dialogue, are of utmost importance,<sup>3</sup> while Michael Squire and Jonas Grethlein have shown that the *Tablet* is a very deceptive and consciously self-contradictory text.<sup>4</sup> Both studies reinforce my initial intuition, according to which the *Tablet*

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<sup>1</sup> The article presents outcomes of a research project funded by the National Science Centre, Poland: *Idea Apocalyptica seu Apocalypsis Stanislai Orichovii. Edition, translation and interpretation of a Pseudo-Orichovian eschatologico-political apocrypha*, Reg. No.: 2020/37/N/HS1/02549.

<sup>2</sup> I learned of this text by studying the works of the Polish Renaissance humanist Jan Dymitr Solikowski (1539–1603), whose *Facies perturbatae et afflictiae Reipublicae* (1564) was deeply influenced by the *Tablet*. See Jakub Wolak, “Sickness and Death of the Body Politic in Early Modern Poland: Republic’s Lamentation in Literature and Political Discourse,” forthcoming in *Central European Cultures* 5, no. 1 (2025).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Joly, *Le Tableau de Cébès et la philosophie religieuse* (Brussels-Berchem: Latomus, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Squire and Jonas Grethlein, “Counterfeit in Character but Persuasive in Appearance”: Reviewing the *Ainigma of the Tabula Cebetis*,” *Classical Philology* 109, no. 4 (October 2014): 285–324.

belongs to the tradition of Platonic dialogues and maintains their ambiguous use of the language of mysteries as well as Socratic irony.

However, it is not my intention to venture into doxographical debates and to attribute the *Tablet* to one or another philosophical school of the Imperial period.<sup>5</sup> Instead, I intend to follow in the footsteps of the protagonist of the dialogue in question, an old sage who explains the meaning of the allegorical tablet to his interlocutors, and reenact his exegetical endeavor. If there is a particular tradition I will be faithful to when giving the exegesis of the *Tablet*, it may be the one founded by Leo Strauss. I am deeply convinced that the unknown author of the dialogue represents particular craftsmanship in what Strauss termed the ancient art of writing. Strauss read ancient philosophical texts as emerging from a strong tension between the philosopher and the city and thus written in a labyrinthine, enigmatic manner, and addressed first and foremost to those few readers who were learned enough to read between the lines.<sup>6</sup> The *Tablet* is a great example of this tradition of writing, and I will show that all its aforementioned traits prove its deep subversivity, which has gone largely unnoticed by most scholars.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. SUMMARY OF THE *TABLET* AND STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT

I will begin my exposition with a general summary of the contents of this (today) largely unknown text, focusing on what I consider most important for the exegesis which follows.<sup>8</sup>

The narrator, who speaks in the plural, is addressed by the interlocutor, the old man, *πρεσβύτης*, as *ξένοι*, “foreigners,” “guests,” or “aliens” (2.1).<sup>9</sup> They

<sup>5</sup> See also M. B. Trapp, “On the *Tablet* of Cebes,” in *Aristotle and After*, ed. Richard Sorabji (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 1997), 168–71.

<sup>6</sup> Leo Strauss, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 22–37.

<sup>7</sup> A perfect example being Trapp’s statement that “it is mere perversity to use the concept of religion to make the *Tablet* into an exposition of anything other than moral doctrine” (“On the *Tablet* of Cebes,” 162). The exegesis I am about to present may be indeed subversive, yet this results from nothing else but the nature of the *Tablet* itself, which, as I will show, is full of subtle philosophical subversiveness.

<sup>8</sup> For other summaries see, e.g., Trapp, “On the *Tablet* of Cebes,” 160–62; Rainer Hirsch-Luipold, introduction to *Die Bildtafel des Kebes. Allegorie des Lebens*, ed. Rainer Hirsch-Luipold et al. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005), 12–15; Squire and Grethlein, “Counterfeit in Character but Persuasive in Appearance,” 288–90.

<sup>9</sup> Parenthetical references in the text should be understood to be to the *Tablet*. I use the edition

wander through the temple of Kronos, in an unspecified city, and behold a tablet (πίναξ) or a strange painting (γραφὴ ξένη), hung on the wall (1.1); they are then approached by the old man, who offers to interpret it.

It is already at this point that the uncanny symmetry between the tablet and the *Tablet*, the artifact and the text, is unveiled. The narrator first recounts the general impression of the tablet: an enclosure with two enclosures within; a crowd, ὄχλος, at the gate of the first enclosure, numerous women within the enclosure, and an old man, γέρων, seemingly giving some instruction to the entering crowd (1.2–3). Right after this short glimpse they are approached by the old man, πρεσβύτες, from whom they receive instructions regarding the allegorical meaning of the artifact.

No wonder, says the old man, that the guests are confused; many locals do not understand the meaning of the tablet either. This is because it was not offered by a citizen of the polis—it is no “political” offering, οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐστὶ πολιτικὸν ἀνάθημα, but it was hung in the temple a long time ago by a foreigner or guest, ξένος, a sage whose works and deeds testified to the fact that he lived a truly Pythagorean and Parmenidean life. The old man knew and admired the sage in his youth, and discussed important questions with him (2.1–2).

Before proceeding to the exegesis, the old man warns his audience that it involves a certain risk, a danger. For if they understand, they will be prudent and happy (φρόνιμοι καὶ εὐδαίμονες ἔσσεσθε); if not, they will become imprudent, possessed by an evil spirit, stupid and unlearned, and will live badly (ἄφρονες καὶ κακοδαίμονες καὶ πικροὶ καὶ ἀμαθεῖς γενόμενοι κακῶς βιώσεσθε) (3.1–2). He further compares the exegesis to the riddle of the Sphinx, and the Sphinx herself to imprudence (ἄφροσύνη); therefore, he suggests that the very life of his audience is at risk. The riddle is about the good and bad, or, to put it more precisely, what is good and what is bad, and what is not good and what is not bad (3.3). Having given the warning, the old man proceeds to the exegesis proper, and begins with naming the place: the depicted place, he says, is called Life, καλεῖται οὗτος ὁ τόπος Βίος (4.2). The tablet is an allegory of human life.

Then he explains the scene already noticed by the audience. The crowd at the gates represents people about to enter life; the old man at the gate,

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by Rainer Hirsch-Luipold, “ΚΕΒΗΤΟΣ ΠΙΝΑΞ,” in *Die Bildtafel des Kebes*, 68–110. For an English translation see Keith Seddon, *Epictetus’ “Handbook” and the “Tablet of Cebes”: Guides to Stoic Living* (London: Routledge, 2005), 185–200.

who holds a paper in one hand and a pointer in the other, is called *Daemon* (Δαίμων).<sup>10</sup> He tells the newcomers what they should do in order to be saved in their lives (σώζεσθαι ἐν τῷ βίῳ) (4.3).<sup>11</sup> There is also another figure, a woman seated on a throne, named *Deceit* (Ἀπάτη), handing out a drink of her own powers, error and ignorance, to those who enter life. It is drunk by everybody, although not in the same amount by each (5.1–6.1).

Having entered the first enclosure, the newcomers encounter three groups of women, *Opinions* (Δόξαι), *Desires* (Ἐπιθυμίας) and *Pleasures* (Ἡδοναί), who lead some of them to salvation, and some to peril (6.2). The area behind the first enclosure is populated by numerous other personifications, such as *Fortune* (Τύχη), and numerous vices, threatening those who receive something from *Fortune* (7.1–9.4). The passage from the first to the second enclosure is achieved after meeting *Conversion* (Μετάνοια) and, most importantly, being led by *Opinion* and *Desire* towards either *True* or *False Paideia* (Ἀληθινὴ Παιδεία or Ψευδοπαιδεία) (10.4–11.1).

*True* and *False Paideia*, who are perhaps the most important personifications in the *Tablet*, reside behind the second enclosure. *False Paideia* is surrounded by her acolytes: poets, rhetoricians, dialecticians, musicians, arithmeticians, astrologers, critics, hedonists, Peripatetics, and others of the like (13.1–2). *True Paideia*, although mentioned by the exegete, is not seen at first glance; he explains that she dwells in “that place [over there], inhabited by no one, seemingly a desert” (τόπον τινὰ ἐκείνον, ὅπου οὐδείς ἐπικατοικεῖ, ἀλλ’ ἔρημος δοκεῖ εἶναι) (15.1). Discerning between *True* and *False Paideia*, says the exegete, requires a catharsis, a drink of purifying powers (14.3–4); having accepted it, one may proceed up through a steep and rocky road towards the *True Paideia*, enjoying aid of *Self-Mastery* (Ἐγκράτεια) and *Containment* (Καρτερία), whom he meets during the ascent (15.2–16.5).

After the encounter with *Self-Mastery* and *Containment* the road becomes “beautiful, straight, easy and free of all evil” (καλὴ τε καὶ ὁμαλὴ καὶ εὐπόρευτος καὶ καθαρὰ παντὸς κακοῦ) (16.5), right before reaching a grove and a meadow with another enclosure and gate. This is, says the exegete, the *Abode of the Blessed/Happy* (Εὐδαιμόνων οἰκητήριον), the seat of *Virtues* (Ἀρεταί) and *Happiness* (Εὐδαιμονία). It is right before this gate that the *True Paideia* is found, accompanied by *Truth* (Ἀλήθεια) and *Persuasion* (Πειθώ)

<sup>10</sup> Although some authors tend to translate δαίμων, δαίμονες as *daimon* or *daimones*, I see no reason to refrain from the use of the more common words *daemon* or *daemons*.

<sup>11</sup> Hirsch-Luipold’s edition reads Βίω, capitalized.

(17.1–18.2). She heals those who come with a purifying drink; the purified are then led by the Virtues before the enthroned and crowned Happiness who sits in the propylaeum of the citadel, the ἀκρόπολις (19.4–21.3).

As the ascent towards Happiness is completed, the reader may notice a subtle shift in the mood of the dialogue; the exegete is occupied less with explaining the names and functions of the personae and more with answering questions asked by his audience. Having shown how Happiness is attained, he is forced to tell what Happiness is and what it means to be Happy.

The first question is simple: What happens upon approaching Happiness? A coronation takes place: Happiness endows the one who finished the ascent with a crown of her own power, for he emerged victorious from the greatest of contests (22.1). What happens then? He is led back to where he came from by the Virtues to see people living badly, as if their life were a shipwreck (24.2). These are those who forgot the instructions given by the Daemon upon entering Life. Why should he watch them? Because earlier he mistook what was not good for good and led a bad life; now, having attained knowledge, he may live a noble life and gaze upon those who act basely (καλῶς ζῆ καὶ τούτους θεωρεῖ ὡς κακῶς πράσσουσιν) (25.2). And where shall he go then? Wherever he wants, for he is safe everywhere as he lives well and will be received as a healer among the sick; he will not be burdened (οὐ μὴ διοχληθήσεται) by anything, for he reigns (κυριεύει) over all things and is superior to everything. Like those who survived a snake's bite, he is immune to evil and possesses an innate remedy (ἀντιφάρμακον) (26.1–3).

Then the attention of the questioning audience turns back to the beginning of the ascent, to the Daemon standing at the first gate of Life, of whom, as they complain, the exegete said little beyond mentioning his name. They ask of his instructions; the old man initially restricts himself to just one word, θαρρεῖν, be bold (30.1–2). He further elaborates: the Daemon reportedly instructs them to not trust Fortune and to quickly proceed in Life to Paideia; to spend some time with False Paideia and take from her whatever one wishes as a provision, and then escape as soon as possible to the True Paideia (30.3–32.5). When asked to clarify what should be taken from the False Paideia, the exegete responds: writings (γράμματα) and other kinds of learning (ἄλλα μαθήματα), which, as Plato says, are to the youth what reins are to the horse (33.3). However—and he stresses this firmly—none of this is necessary for proceeding towards True Paideia and is incidental to becoming better, just as using an interpreter is not necessary for understanding a foreigner, since it is always better to learn his language and converse without

intermediaries (33.3–4). To conclude, the learned have no substantial advantages over the others; the fact that they follow False Paideia and stay relatively close to where True Paideia lives is after all meaningless if they do not proceed further (34.1–35.5).

A short argument follows, originating from a recourse to the exegete's earlier allusion to the fact that the gifts of Fortune are neither good nor bad; he promised to the audience that he will elaborate upon this later. Fulfilling his promise, he proves that things which are desired and widely regarded as good, such as life, wealth, children, or victory are neither good nor bad; they are but means which may be used well. The only good, concludes the exegete, is being prudent (τὸ φρονεῖν), while being imprudent (τὸ ἀφρονεῖν) is the only evil (36.1–41.3; for the earlier mention see 8.4).

### 3. THE *TABLET* AND THE ART OF WRITING

Before embarking upon an exegesis of my own I will briefly present evidence that the *Tablet* is an atypical text which requires particularly careful interpretation. As stated in the introduction, I will follow the tradition associated with Leo Strauss, who argued that the division between exoteric and esoteric teaching is essential for ancient philosophy and held that “some of the greatest writers of the past have . . . adapted their literary technique to the requirements of persecution, by presenting their views on all the then crucial questions exclusively between the lines.”<sup>12</sup> However, as Strauss also notes, it is not only persecution which motivated this type of writing, but the nature of philosophy itself. Ancient philosophers “believed that the gulf separating ‘the wise’ and ‘the vulgar’ was a basic fact of human nature which could not be influenced by any progress of popular education: philosophy, or science, was essentially a privilege of ‘the few.’”<sup>13</sup>

This belief is perhaps best attested in Plato's dialogues—not to mention his letters, the authenticity of which is contested<sup>14</sup>—in numerous derogatory mentions of “the many,” οἱ πολλοί, the allegory of the cave,<sup>15</sup> or in the critique

<sup>12</sup> Strauss, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” 25.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>14</sup> For a recent claim of the literary unity of the letters, see Plato's “Letters”: *The Political Challenges of the Philosophic Life*, ed. and trans. Ariel Hefler (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Republic* VII 514a–520a.



of writing from the *Phaedrus*.<sup>16</sup> The literary genre of philosophical dialogue, founded by Plato, is genetically related to Socrates's teaching and trial, and it is not illegitimate to suspect that it was invented as a response to constant tension between philosophy and the polis, a device crafted to pass down the philosophical tradition.<sup>17</sup>

It was already noted that the *Tablet* is a text of particular craftsmanship, the work of a crafty author. The most popular, reportedly self-evident interpretation, according to which its message amounts to a pedagogical one, a praise of *paideia* as the only way to attain salvation in life, seems questionable owing to numerous hints at a mystery tradition as well as inconsistencies perhaps consciously inserted into the text, a brief overview of which will serve as a summary of the most important questions raised by contemporary scholars who have dealt with the *Tablet*.

The two most extensive studies of the *Tablet* are those of Karl Praechter (1893)<sup>18</sup> and Robert Joly (1965).<sup>19</sup> Despite their fundamental discord, both are historicist in approach and their main concern is to locate the *Tablet* within a broad scope of ancient intellectual history or history of philosophy. Whereas Praechter argues that the *Tablet* amalgamates Stoic and Cynic doctrines, Joly attempts to prove that it is a monument of what he calls *philosophie religieuse*, containing numerous hints at mystery religions and orphism.

Joly's book is of utmost importance for my study not because of his historico-philosophical thesis but because of a clear and well-grounded statement that the *Tablet* is to be read as an esoteric text.<sup>20</sup> The Belgian scholar acknowledges the presence of elements of Stoic and Cynic philosophy in the *Tablet*; however, he argues that its true message, which is to be understood only by the initiated, is of a Neo-Pythagorean, mystery and eschatological character, while the Stoico-Cynic moral is but a disguise addressed to the profane.<sup>21</sup> The ascent towards the Abode of the Blessed represents not philosophical education but rather liberation from the vicious cycle of

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 274c–276c.

<sup>17</sup> Strauss, introduction to *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 15–17.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Praechter, *Cebetis Tabula quanam aetate conscripta esse videatur* (Marburg: G. Braun, 1885).

<sup>19</sup> Joly, *Le Tableau de Cébès et la philosophie religieuse*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 54–55: “L’auteur a simplement voulu donner à sa doctrine ésotérique une forme littéraire courante, ἡ ἐκφρασις.”

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 70: “Pour le profane, le Tableau offre, mêlées à une morale volontariste, ascétique, mais au fond banale, quelques vagues idées stoïciennes et quelques notions apparemment cyniques. A l’initié, il offre surtout un aperçu ‘énigmatique’ de la morale et de l’eschatologie néo-pythagoriciennes.”

reincarnation, which requires πόνος, καθάρσις, and μετάνοια, and leads to the astral immortality reportedly enjoyed by the Blessed.<sup>22</sup>

A huge amount of evidence amassed by the author did not deliver him from staunch criticism; indeed, his zealous dedication to the championed reading resulted in a few perhaps overly arbitrary comparisons.<sup>23</sup> Despite this, Joly undoubtedly proved that the *Tablet* is full of references to eschatology and mystery religions, and the only questionable aspect of his study is that it lacks careful discussion of the literary function of these references.

The most important parallels which recur throughout *Le Tableau de Cébès et la philosophie religieuse* are those with Plato's *Republic*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*,<sup>24</sup> Plutarch's *De sera numinis vindicta*, *De facie* and *De genio socratis*,<sup>25</sup> Pseudo-Platonic *Axiochos*,<sup>26</sup> the *Shepherd* of Hermias,<sup>27</sup> *Vita Apolloni*,<sup>28</sup> and Dio Chrysostomus.<sup>29</sup> Joly devotes particular attention to eschatological myths in which many of Plato's and Plutarch's dialogues culminate. Yet, becoming immersed in comparing and interpreting myths, he overlooks an essential question of the intention behind writing them down and incorporating them into a work of literature.<sup>30</sup>

This is nowhere more evident than in the very line in which Joly outlines what he calls *la question décisive*. Having gathered the first impressive set

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>23</sup> See reviews by Jacques Schwartz, *L'Antiquité Classique* 32, no. 2 (1963): 647–48; John Victor Luce, *Classical Review* 14, no. 1 (Mar. 1964): 38–39; Michael von Albrecht, *Gnomon* 36, no. 8 (Dec. 1964): 755–59; Leendert Gerrit Westerink, *Mnemosyne*, 4th ser., 18, no. 1 (1965): 85–86; and Robert Turcan, *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 167, no. 2 (April–June 1965): 219–20 (the most favorable one), as well as an enthusiastic paper by Antonio Carlini, “Sulla composizione della *Tabula* di Cebete,” *Studi classici e orientali*, no. 12 (1963): 164–82.

<sup>24</sup> Plato, *Republic* 614c–616c; *Phaedo* 64a, 67e, 69c, 88b, 113dff., 114b–d, 115c; *Phaedrus* 247a, 248cff.

<sup>25</sup> Plutarch, *De sera* 564d–568a; *De facie* 941c–945e; *De genio* 590b–598f.

<sup>26</sup> Ps.-Plato, *Axiochos* 371a–372a.

<sup>27</sup> Hermias, *Shepherd* 1.3; 2.2; 10.4; 15.1; 16; 21.3; 56.1; 66.2; 69.6; 92; 114.1.

<sup>28</sup> Philostratus, *Vita Apolloni* 1.20; 4.25; 4.41; 8.19.

<sup>29</sup> Dio Chrysostomus, *Orations* 1.55; 4.114–15; 10.31–32.

<sup>30</sup> Plato himself stresses this ambiguity; see *Phaedo* 114d1–2, where Socrates comments on the myth he has just finished telling: “it isn't fitting for a man of intelligence to affirm with confidence that these things are just as I've related them; however, that either these things are so, or something like them . . . that's what seems fitting to me . . . and worth the risk for one believing it to be so” (trans. Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy). Notably, Joly used a subsequent phrase, καλὸς γὰρ ὁ κίνδυνος (“for the risk is a noble one”) (114d6), as a motto of his monograph.

of proof material, he asks whether it should be considered “just a literary device” or “read literally,” a “simple metaphor” or a “profound reality.”<sup>31</sup>

This is, in my opinion, the biggest weakness, as the decisive question of this zealous study is, as I suppose, based on a false dichotomy which seems to assume that rhetoric and syntax are by definition distinct from meaning and the work of literature can be viewed either as a display of formal mastery or a meaningful hint at a reality beyond it. Joly is trying to persuade us that the author of the *Tablet* either used all the mystery references merely for reasons of style or wrote a sacred, revelatory text which initiates its readers into a higher realm. *Tertium non datur*.

Strikingly, such an attitude testifies to a lack of genuine interest in the text itself, for it is read only for the sake of seeing beyond it. It is not contemplated and analyzed as a work of art, but as a testimony of extratextual phenomena, such as ancient mystery cults and eschatological beliefs. In short, Joly represents the same reductionist attitude as the proponents of historicism such as Praechter, one aiming at reducing the text to a chapter in the history of philosophical schools, another at proposing different categorization, and subsuming it to a different branch of historical phenomena. Despite all comparative material they amass (and that amassed by Joly is perhaps the most important point of reference of my interpretation), they are incapable of observing the autonomy and ambiguity of the studied text. Joly is happy to admit that the *Tablet* is enigmatic only insofar as it adds to his list of traits similar to the Neo-Pythagorean literature,<sup>32</sup> but remains unable to see the very labyrinthine structure of the dialogue, its ambiguity and subversiveness. He rightly claims that it is esoteric, but he is wrong to assume that this adds up to two clear and separate messages within the text without any internal tension or interplay involved.

Out of many reviewers of *Le Tableau de Cébès et la philosophie religieuse*, Jacques Schwartz perspicaciously noted that the study would benefit from a deeper inquiry into the question of mimesis, that is, as I understand it, from considering the problematic ontological status of the work of art as well as the intratextual matters including the structure of the dialogue, relations between its speakers and the way questions are posed and answered by them,

<sup>31</sup> Joly, *Le Tableau de Cébès*, 52: “Tout cet ensemble — impressionnant — de traits évoquant les mystères, l’eschatologie, doit-il être considéré comme un procédé purement littéraire ou doit-il être pris au pied de la lettre? Simple métaphore ou réalité profonde?”

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 53–55.

and how the text imitates a conversation, which is itself devoted to another work of art, and therefore an imitation.<sup>33</sup>

A thorough discussion of these aspects of the text, which resulted in reasonable evidence of the *Tablet's* deceptiveness, was sparked by a related chapter of Jaś Elsner's *Art and the Roman Viewer* (1997). Elsner accepted Joly's identification of the *Tablet* as a religious text and focused on the relation between the described artifact and the viewers who listen to the old exegete. He first noted the parallel between what the viewers see at first glance—a crowd at the gates and an old man giving them instructions—and what the viewers recognize directly afterwards as their own setting—being given instructions by an old man, the exegete. Therefore, as Elsner argues, “the picture is re-enacting the frame which has just introduced it” and “what the viewers are doing in hearing the . . . explanation, is nothing other than an enactment of the very situation which the image itself depicts.”<sup>34</sup>

What Elsner discovered is that the text and the picture—both of which are as ambiguously as craftily amalgamated by being denoted by a single Greek word, γραφή—have an autonomous power of their own, and that the one who beholds them is being held under this very power, which is perhaps mediated by the exegete.<sup>35</sup> This is precisely why Elsner's concern with the act of viewing is so much in line with Joly's religious reading of the *Tablet*: the artifact is presented by the exegete as both telling the story of salvation and being a medium of salvation, a riddle involving grave danger, comparable to the one asked by the Sphinx.<sup>36</sup>

Since Elsner, who used the *Tablet* as a paradigm for a nonmimetic understanding of art, was not interested in questioning the religious interpretation, he concluded that the picture described in the dialogue was an object of sacred art, a mystical device which uses allegory and polysemy to transform the commonsense world and initiate the viewer into “a True Reality.” The

<sup>33</sup> Schwartz, review of *Le Tableau de Cébès et la philosophie religieuse*, 648: “Peut-être l'auteur aurait-il dû mieux se poser les questions que soulève la mimesis et les lieux communs; il aurait sans doute vu moins d'intentions derrière un texte, finalement, assez pauvre.”

<sup>34</sup> Jaś Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 42.

<sup>35</sup> This was perhaps even more vividly pointed out by Markus Hafner in a paper titled after the exegete's utterance from 2.1 and focusing on the rhetorical force of the *Tablet*. See Markus Hafner, “τί ποτε αὔτη ἡ μυθολογία δύναται—Die Macht der Rede in der *Tabula Cebetis*,” *Hermes* 141, no. 1 (2013): 65–82.

<sup>36</sup> “Instead of the viewer having control or power over the ‘other’—an inert picture—it turns out that the viewer's own life forever after depends upon this moment of viewing” (*ibid.*, 42).

picture itself is, as he has it, “transformed in the mysterious act of exegetic viewing,” and its content transmuted “from obscurity to clarity, from ignorance to insight.”<sup>37</sup> For his own reasons, he was more than happy to fall under the spell of the old exegete, or the unknown author, and not to look for the very source of its power.

Elsner’s remarks were further elaborated upon by Michael Squire and Jonas Grethlein, who provided more examples of parallels between the pictorial interpretation embedded within the narrative frame of the dialogue and the narrative frame itself. Moreover, they noticed a fundamental tension between the *Tablet’s* ethical message and its own aesthetic form,<sup>38</sup> a tension realized by the author and carefully signaled. Before discussing this tension, which is perhaps the point of departure for my own interpretation, I shall recollect the parallels documented by Squire and Grethlein, which are the following:<sup>39</sup>

1.     a) the Daemon standing at the gates of Life and  
        b) the old exegete who not only resembles him, as Elsner noted, but is even called ὁ δαιμόνιε by his audience (6.2);
2.     a) the Desires (Ἐπιθυμίας) found in the first enclosure (6.2) and  
        b) the desire of the exegete’s audience to hear the exegesis (3.1: πάνυ γὰρ ἐπιθυμοῦμεν ἀκοῦσαι; 4.1: εἰς μεγάλην τινὰ ἐπιθυμίαν ἐμβέβληκας ἡμᾶς);
3.     a) sinners “handed over to Punishment” in the first enclosure (παραδίδονται τῇ Τιμωρίᾳ, 9.4) and  
        b) those destroyed by the Sphinx described by the old exegete as similar to “those who are handed over for punishment” (3.3: καθάπερ οἱ ἐπὶ τιμωρίᾳ παραδιδόμενοι);
4.     a) numerous mentions about life in the narrative frame (3.1: βιώσασθε; 3.3: ἐν ὄλῳ τῷ βίῳ; 3.4: ἐν παντὶ τῷ βίῳ) and  
        b) Life as the name of the place depicted (4.2);
5.     a) the danger which the exegesis involves (3.1) and

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 44–45.

<sup>38</sup> Squire and Grethlein, “Counterfeit in Character but Persuasive in Appearance,” 302.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 295–97.

- b) the “great danger” of falling under the influence of False Paideia (12.1), as well as the other dangers faced during the ascent;
6. a) the alternative between “being saved” and “perishing” first mentioned by the exegete (3.2: ἐσώζετο; 3.4: σώζεται; 3.2: ἀλώετο; 3.3: ἀπόλλυται) and
- b) recurring later in the picture (6.2: αἱ μὲν εἰς τὸ σώζεσθαι [ἀπάγουσιν] . . . αἱ δὲ εἰς τὸ ἀπόλλυσθαι, 6.2) and all further dialogue (4.3: σώζεσθαι ἐν τῷ Βίῳ; 12.3: οἱ . . . σωζόμενοι; 14.4: σωθήσονται; 24.3: σωθῆναι; 35.5: σωθεῖεν; 27.2: οἱ σεσωσμένοι; 32.5: ἀπόλλυται).
7. a) the audience being “saved and . . . blessed and happy in one’s whole life” as a result of understanding the exegesis (3.4: αὐτὸς δὲ σώζεται καὶ μακάριος καὶ εὐδαίμων γίνεται ἐν παντὶ τῷ βίῳ) and
- b) the protagonist of the ascent who, having recognized True Paideia, is likewise “saved and becomes blessed and happy in his life” (11.2: σώζεται καὶ μακάριος καὶ εὐδαίμων γίνεται ἐν τῷ βίῳ);
8. a) the narrow path leading to True Paideia being both “difficult to look upon” (15.4: καὶ μάλα γε χαλεπὴ προσιδεῖν) by the beholders of the tablet and
- b) difficult to climb for the protagonist of the ethical ascent.
9. Notably, Markus Hafner adds another parallel, remarkable for its concision: the exegete’s response to the question of the Daemon’s instructions, which reads as follows: θαρρεῖν, ἔφη. διὸ καὶ ὑμεῖς θαρρεῖτε (30.2). The response includes both a purported “quotation” from the paper (χάρτη) held by the daemon and addressed at those who enter life, and its instant repetition by the exegete, addressed at his audience.<sup>40</sup>

We can therefore propose a general rule that almost everything which is found in the narrative frame is mirrored by the pictorial interpretation, and vice versa. The *Tablet’s* structure, being far from self-evident, is definitely self-referential. But what is the relation between the *Tablet* and the tablet of which we first read in the narrative frame and which then rises to the main subject of the dialogue? This, as Squire and Grethlein rightly noticed,

<sup>40</sup> Markus Hafner, “‘This Place Is Called ‘Life’: On the Boundaries of Ekphrasis in the *Tabula Cebe-tis*,” in *The Semantics of Space in Greek and Roman Narratives*, ed. Virginia Fabrizi, *Distant Worlds Journal Special Issues 2* (Heidelberg: Propylaeum, 2018), 114.

is very discreetly suggested at the moment when the exegete speaks of the Daemon's instruction regarding the benefits from the False Paideia and mentions "γράμματα and other kinds of learning [ἄλλα μαθήματα], which, as Plato says, are to the youth what reins are to a horse, so they are not diverted to different pursuits" (33.3: γράμματα, ἔφη, καὶ τῶν ἄλλων μαθημάτων ἃ καὶ Πλάτων φησὶν ὡσανεὶ χαλινοῦ τινος δύναμιν ἔχειν τοῖς νέοις, ἵνα μὴ εἰς ἕτερα περισπῶνται).<sup>41</sup>

The word γράμματα means both writings and paintings, and the picture which is subject to exegesis falls within the scope of artifacts that it denotes. This is well evidenced by the text itself, which refers to the tablet as γραφή (1.1; 2.1; 2.2; 4.2) and τὸ γεγραμμένον (1.2). Therefore we are being told that the *Tablet* itself belongs not to the True Paideia but to the false one, and we may ask whether the initial impression, that viewing or reading is equivalent to the ethical ascent itself, is but an illusion. The uncanny feeling of being lost in a labyrinth—or in a house of mirrors—is reinforced by the fact that the mimetic parallel between the pictorial interpretation and the narrative frame, which first evoked the aforementioned impression, is perversely maintained. It is made even stronger by another subtle echo: according to the exegete, the Daemon instructs those who enter life to "dwell for some time" with Pseudo-Paideia (32.4: αὐτοῦ χρόνον τινὰ ἐνδιατρίψαι) and the exegete tells his audience to "dwell on my words, until you make them your habit" (35.5: ἐνδιατρίβετε τοῖς λεγομένοις, μέχρι ἂν ἕξιν λάβητε).<sup>42</sup>

Squire and Grethlein conclude that the aforementioned tension is woven into the structure of the dialogue as a reflexive reference to the "mode of aesthetic illusion" within which the *Tablet* operates, and suggest that the real intention of the text may be to warn against "the text's pedagogical capacity to deceive"<sup>43</sup> and to teach the most careful readers that they should withhold from succumbing to aesthetic illusion, which, as they suggest, may be the real obstacle hindering one from proceeding towards salvation. This illusion,

<sup>41</sup> Squire and Grethlein, "Counterfeit in Character but Persuasive in Appearance," 307–8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 308. Hafner briefly suggests that "a way out of this dilemma is indicated by the fictitious orality of the dialogic setting," probably meaning that the oral character of the conversation cancels out its classification as γραφή and consequent ascription to the False Paideia. This suggestion is quite unconvincing given the fact that we are dealing with a written dialogue and there is no way out of writing here; there is only a hint at a purported real enacted dialogue of which we know nothing except of what is transmitted through writing. Consequently, we can suppose that there is some truth, and some True Paideia, hidden by the mimetic falsehood of writing, but we cannot attain it otherwise than through textual exegesis. Hafner, "This Place Is Called 'Life,'" 118n43.

<sup>43</sup> Squire and Grethlein, "Counterfeit in Character but Persuasive in Appearance," 302.

which may lead to total absorption by the aesthetic deception of the text, is, as Grethlein and Squire argue, the true danger of the exegesis. Those who mistake reading and viewing for the very ascent to True Paideia are those who perish, as if devoured by the Sphinx, or, to phrase it differently, who are stuck in the second enclosure along with numerous acolytes of the False Paideia.<sup>44</sup>

The insights of Joly, Elsner, Hafner, and Grethlein and Squire, as well as the evidence they gathered, are more than sufficient to legitimize my initial claim that the *Tablet* meets the requirements set for the text to be “read between the lines” and interpreted as a monument of esoteric writing.<sup>45</sup> The analysis of particular utterances of the exegete in the context of the whole structure of the dialogue proves that the author hints at the very question of writing, in a way perhaps not dissimilar to Plato. Consider, on one hand, the myth of Theuth from the *Phaedrus*, when the invention of writing is metaphorically compared to a drug or a medicine, τὸ φάρμακον,<sup>46</sup> and, on the other, the potion handed out by Deceit to those who enter Life (5.2) and the antidote, τὸ ἀντιφάρμακον, received from the hands of the True Paideia (27.3). Given the fact that Deceit’s potion is not a symbol of writing but a mixture of Error and Ignorance, and that writing is ascribed to the False Paideia rather than the true one, this is by no means a direct reference but rather an allusion by which we learn that the author of the *Tablet* is a very conscious representative of the tradition of writing established by Plato.

So as to anticipate tentative objections, which could have been voiced by more orthodox followers of Leo Strauss, that the *Tablet* does not belong to the so-called Great Books of the Western tradition, which they traditionally prefer as the object of interpretation, I shall shortly recall evidence of its vast popularity in the early modern age. Cora E. Lutz counted thirteen to seventeen translations into Latin after 1497 and five to seven commentaries,<sup>47</sup> while Heinz-Günther Nesselrath listed twenty-five editions from the sixteenth to

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 306, 308–12.

<sup>45</sup> Strauss very briefly mentioned these requirements in “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” 30: “Reading between the lines is strictly prohibited in all cases where it would be less exact than not doing so. Only such reading between the lines as starts from an exact consideration of the explicit statements of the author is legitimate.”

<sup>46</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 274c–275c.

<sup>47</sup> Cora E. Lutz, “Ps.-Cebes,” *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum* 6 (1986), 1–14. The higher numbers include translations and commentaries judged doubtful by Lutz. See also Sandra Sider, “Ps.-Cebes. Addenda,” *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum* 7 (1992), 299–300; Gerard J. Boter, “Ps.-Cebes. Addenda et Corrigenda,” *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum* 9 (2011), 247–49.



the eighteenth century.<sup>48</sup> The dialogue was translated into French, English, Spanish, Italian, German, Dutch, and Polish in less than a hundred years since the first printed edition came out;<sup>49</sup> in the seventeenth century Claude Saumaise prepared an edition of a mediaeval Arabic translation accompanied with a Latin translation by Johan Elihmann,<sup>50</sup> while Agostino Mascardi published *Discorsi morali sù la tavola di Cebete Tebano*.<sup>51</sup> The *Tablet* was used for teaching Greek and ethics up until the late nineteenth century and subject to numerous school editions;<sup>52</sup> its authority began to wane as a result of the rise of scientific philology and historicism, the proponents of which successfully questioned the purported authorship of Cebes the disciple of Socrates. Consequently, it has lost its status and fell out not only from the curriculum of general education but also from the set of texts with which a professional classical scholar is expected to be at least fairly familiar.<sup>53</sup>

Besides enjoying considerably elevated and influential position in the republic of letters for at least four centuries, the *Tablet* invites a very serious exegesis for another reason, and perhaps the most essential one. It is a dialogue on happiness and salvation, a text which was approached by numerous readers willing to learn how to live a noble life; that is, it was read by many as a text of high seriousness and existential importance. This is precisely what the *Tablet*, at least seemingly, expects of its readers; and the instructions of both the daemon and the exegete regarding how to proceed with

<sup>48</sup> Heinz-Günther Nesselrath, "Von Kebes zu Pseudo-Kebes," in Hirsch-Luipold et al., *Die Bildtafel des Kebes. Allegorie des Lebens*, 62–65.

<sup>49</sup> For a monumental comparative edition see Sandra Sider, *Cebes' Tablet: Fascimiles of the Greek Text, and of Selected Latin, French, English, Spanish, Italian, German, Dutch, and Polish Translations* (New York: Renaissance Society of America, 1979).

<sup>50</sup> *Tabula Cebetis Graece, Arabice, Latine. Item aurea carmina Pythagorae, cum paraphrasi Arabica. Auctore Iohanne Elichmanno M.D. Cum praefatione Cl. Salmasii* (Leiden: Typis Iohannis Maire, 1640). My gratitude goes to an excellent Salmasian scholar, Antoine Haaker, who first turned my attention to the *Tablet*.

<sup>51</sup> First edition: *Discorsi morali di Agostino Mascardi sù la Tavola di Cebete Tebano* (Venice: Antonio Pinelli, 1627). It was reportedly from this work that Giambattista Vico knew the *Tablet*, which he highly appreciated. See Filomena Sforza, "Vico e la Tavola di Cebete," *Bollettino del Centro di studi vichiani*, nos. 14–15 (1984–85): 253–69.

<sup>52</sup> Nesselrath counted eleven school editions from 1727 until 1840 ("Von Kebes zu Pseudo-Kebes," 65–66).

<sup>53</sup> Franz Susemihl called it "Machwerk," a bad job, and added, with a good dose of scholarly hubris, that "jetzt, nachdem man seinen wahren Charakter und seine grosse Färb- und Bedeutungslosigkeit erkannt hat, bietet es nur noch ein geringes Interesse dar" (now, after the discovery of its real character and its lack of meaning and flabbiness, it attracts little attention). Franz Susemihl, *Geschichte der griechischen Litteratur in der Alexandrinerzeit*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1891), 24–25, quoted in Hafner, "τί ποτε αὐτῆ ἡ μυθολογία δύναιται," 65n1.

the readerly ascent could as well read “*tua res agitur*.”<sup>54</sup> As Allan Bloom has it, the true citizens of the republic of letters studied the writings of the past “not for the reasons which ordinarily motivate scholars, but because they believed, almost literally, that their salvation depended on it.”<sup>55</sup> The *Tablet* was indubitably addressed to such a devout public, regardless of the place and epoch in which it would be read. Its convolutedness and deceptiveness do not cancel out its preoccupation with life, happiness, and salvation; Squire and Grethlein may have rightly shown that the text is ambiguous and involves a particularly complex self-referentiality, or, to phrase it in a Straussian way, is written according to the art of esoteric writing. All this holds firm, but it does not mean that the ethical and existential questions discussed in the dialogue are but a trickery or an ornament serving as a background to the aesthetical; on the contrary, their understanding requires even more serious and deeper exegesis.

#### 4. THE STORY OF EARTHLY LIFE

The main external textual point of reference of the proposed interpretation is the dialogues of Plato.<sup>56</sup> This is not only because they are the foundational oeuvre of the very literary tradition in which the *Tablet* originates, understood both as the genre of philosophical dialogue and the art of esoteric writing, but also due to a direct hint made by the attribution of the *Tablet* to Cebes of Thebes and many meaningful allusions, some of which I have already mentioned.<sup>57</sup> As for the attribution, we have good reasons to believe that it is as old as the text itself and may have been invented by the actual author. The work usually comes up in the ancient sources as Κέβητος Πίναξ and no ancient writer challenges the authorship of somebody called Cebes,

<sup>54</sup> This was also stressed by Hafner, who documented the rhetorical effort of the author aimed at forcing the reader into maximal existential commitment to the act of reading (“τί ποτε αὐτῆ ἡ μυθολογία δύναται,” 76–81).

<sup>55</sup> Allan Bloom, “The Study of Texts,” in *Giants and Dwarfs: Essays 1960–1990* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 297.

<sup>56</sup> A survey of Platonic motifs in the *Tablet* was published in 1952 by Tadeusz Sinko; it is far from exhaustive, but still very remarkable. See Thaddeus Sinko, “De lineamentis Platonis in Cebetis q.v. tabula,” *Eos* 45 (1951): 3–31.

<sup>57</sup> Another direct hint at the Platonic tradition is the opening words, ἐτυγχάνομεν περιπατοῦντες, identical to the opening words of the Pseudo-Platonic *Eryxias*, written perhaps in the third century BC. See Joseph Souilhé, “Notice,” in Platon, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 12, part 3, *Dialogues apocryphes* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1930), 87–89; D. E. Eichholz, “The Pseudo-Platonic Dialogue *Eryxias*,” *Classical Quarterly* 29, no. 3/4 (July–Oct. 1935): 140–45.

although the toponymic is often omitted. The first mentions of the dialogue, in Lucian's *De mercede conductis* and *Rhetorum praeceptor*, do not even use the title Πίναξ but simply call it "the Cebes," ὁ Κέβης.<sup>58</sup> It seems very likely that the author consciously introduced himself as Cebes of Thebes, thus underlining the Socratic lineage of his dialogue, and I propose to include this attribution as an inherent part of the interpreted text.

The narrator begins with a description of the setting and the yet obscure artifact. It is located in the temple of Kronos and depicts a peculiar story (μῦθος ἴδιος), the very story which is later subject to exegesis lasting up until 33.1 and followed by a discussion, a λόγος. The *Tablet* replicates the mythological structure of Platonic dialogues, but with a different proportion and order, as the story goes first and holds clear primacy, extending over the vast majority of the conversation. The very character of the story is also quite distinct from the one known from the Platonic myths, since it does not openly allude to any religious or cultic tradition, and the only theological reference, save swearing by Heracles and by Zeus,<sup>59</sup> is the initial mention of Kronos.

Kronos is the main figure of two stories found in Plato's dialogues, in the *Statesman* and in the *Laws*.<sup>60</sup> Both stories deal with the golden age of mankind, the "life under Kronos," ὁ ἐπὶ Κρόνου βίος. Both occur in the so-called political dialogues, but do not depict political life in the Greek sense of the word, that is urban life, but a bucolic idyll, thus contributing to an ambiguous tension between the political and the pastoral that pervades the *Statesman*. The images of the age of Kronos seem quite distant from the one presented upon the tablet; however, we will see the importance of this allusion more clearly in the further stages of the exegesis.

Regarding political life, we are seemingly assured that the *Tablet* does not deal with it. The narrator describes it at presenting "neither a city nor an encampment," οὔτε πόλις, οὔτε στρατόπεδον (1.2)—a reference to the shield of Achilles from the eighteenth book of the *Iliad*<sup>61</sup>—and the exegete, soon after approaching the narrator, declares that it was not donated by the city and is no "political offering," οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐστὶ πολιτικὸν ἀνάθημα, but an offering of the old sage to whom the exegete adhered in his youth (2.2).

<sup>58</sup> Lucian, *De mercede conductis* 42; Lucian, *Rhetorum praeceptor* 6.

<sup>59</sup> Zeus: 3.1; 14.2–3; 16.4; 28.1; 39.1. Heracles: 4.1; 12.1; 19.1.

<sup>60</sup> Plato, *Statesman* 268d–274e; *Laws* IV 713c–e.

<sup>61</sup> See Homer, *Iliad* 18.477–617.

There follows the warning of the exegete, which includes a clear statement of the aim of the exegesis: becoming prudent and happy or eudaemonic, φρόνιμοι καὶ εὐδαίμονες. The exegesis as well as the picture itself are presented as a quest for eudaemonia, which is encountered and attained in the final stages of the depicted ascent (17–21). Soon after, the old man explains the first scene (already noted) by his audience, and identifies the old man at the gates as the Daemon. I believe that it is not False nor True Paideia but the Daemon who is the most significant and riddling figure of the whole *Tablet*; it is evident from how large a share of the further discussion is devoted to him and how inquisitively the narrator asks the exegete about the Daemon and his instructions (30–33). Moreover, the Daemon not only corresponds to its extrapictorial analog, that is, the old exegete, but also, internally, to Eudaemonia. This correspondence is evidently rooted in language, as the notion of eudaemonia derives from the notion of daemon; however, it is also woven into the structure of the interpreted picture as its very frame. The Daemon stands at the gates of Life while Eudaemonia sits at the top of it; the two corresponding figures are employed as termini of the allegorical topos. Since a successful ascent to Eudaemonia is attained by the means of following the Daemon's instruction, we can infer that the allegory includes a self-referential definition of happiness as eudaemonia: an allegiance to the Daemon or to the daemonic principle, τὸ δαιμόνιον.

The identification of the old man as the Daemon is directly preceded by the identification of the depicted place as Life and the identification of the people at the gates as those who are about to enter life. The hint at reincarnation was already noted by Sinko, who rightly compared this scene with the scenes of the beyond from the myth of Er;<sup>62</sup> this was naturally elaborated upon by Joly, who argued for the double meaning of βίος in the *Tablet* of Cebes. To the uninitiated it would seemingly depict earthly life, while to the initiated, life in the beyond.<sup>63</sup> He compares the topography of the *Tablet* to the geography of the beyond from the *Phaedo* and to the ambiguous phrase οὐκ ἦμην, ἦμνη, ἐγενόμην, οὐκ εἰμί, οὐ μέλει μοι, used in funerary inscriptions.<sup>64</sup>

Man's journey, as depicted in the discussed tablet, undoubtedly begins before the entrance to life and consequently life is not conceived of as endless and all-encompassing, since the outer wall clearly indicates that it has a limit

<sup>62</sup> Sinko, "De lineamentis Platonis in Cebetis q.v. tabula," 27–29.

<sup>63</sup> Joly, *Le Tableau de Cébès*, 70.

<sup>64</sup> According to Joly, it conveys an Epicurean message when read from left to right, and a mysteric one when read from right to left (*ibid.*, 70–71).

and there is something beyond. However, Joly admits that the ancient writers who mention the *Tablet* do not consider it a work dealing with eschatology, with the notable exception of a late note from the *Suda*, according to which ἔστι δὲ τῶν ἐν ἄδου διήγησις;<sup>65</sup> yet the Belgian scholar overlooks the ambiguity of this passage, which can be understood either as “this is a discussion about what is in Hades” or “this is a discussion conducted by those who are in Hades,” “Hades” meaning not necessarily the underworld, but any sort of beyond.

Joly seems to accept only the first reading: Life presented on the *Tablet* is in reality the life beyond led by the Blessed in their abode, μακάρων νήσοι being reportedly encrypted as εὐδαιμόνων οἰκητήριον.<sup>66</sup> But von Albrecht has rightly noted that the *Suda* passage is “anything but unambiguous,”<sup>67</sup> and that it is not the ascent presented on the tablet which is located in the beyond but the speakers in the temple of Kronos; it is not a gaze from earthly life directed towards the outer world but earthly life contemplated *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is indicated by the mention of Kronos, the god of the golden age who presides over the islands of the blessed, and whose temple is the outer world itself, in which the lower world is contained in the form of the tablet.<sup>68</sup> This is also, as von Albrecht argues, in accordance with Pythagorean doctrines which viewed “the earthly life as the ‘Hades,’ in which the souls undergo expiation.”<sup>69</sup>

To summarize, there is no doubt that the world presented by the author of the *Tablet*—both the world depicted in the discussed artifact and the extrapictorial world of the dialogue—is metempsychotic. However, it does not include a proper eschatological myth such as the geography of the beyond from the *Phaedo*, a first-person account of the reincarnation from the *Republic* or *De sera numinis vindicta*, or a description of a cosmic metempsychotic cycle from *De facie*. Its main concern is the relation of man to his Daemon, a theme indeed eschatological and of huge importance for the aforementioned myths;<sup>70</sup> but this relation, itself rooted in the beyond, is discussed not as part

<sup>65</sup> After Joly, *Le Tableau de Cébès*, 67; see also Sinko, “De lineamentis Platonis in Cebetis q.v. tabula,” 11.

<sup>66</sup> Joly, *Le Tableau de Cébès*, 57.

<sup>67</sup> Von Albrecht, review of *Le Tableau de Cébès et la philosophie religieuse*, 757n6.

<sup>68</sup> Kronos is associated with the islands of the blessed in Pindar, *Olympic Odes* 2.68, as noted by Joly, 59.

<sup>69</sup> Von Albrecht, review of *Le Tableau de Cébès et la philosophie religieuse*, 758.

<sup>70</sup> See Plato, *Republic* X 617d–e, 620d–e; *Phaedo* 107d–e, 113d; Plutarch, *De sera* 564d–568a; *De facie*

of the extraterrestrial world but as the crucial determinant of the course of an earthly life. For a brief explanatory comparison, let us imagine a Jesuit sermon from the seventeenth century; it would be quite natural for the preacher to mention themes such as immortality of the soul, purgatory, or the communion of saints even if his real subject would belong to the affairs of everyday moral or practical life. Eschatological motifs would naturally serve as a dogmatic frame, but it would be gravely misleading to hastily infer from their occurrence that they are the main topic of the sermon.<sup>71</sup>

##### 5. THE ASCENT AND THE POLITICAL DIVISION

We can safely assume that the *Tablet's* main concern pertains to earthly life; this statement can be further reinforced by the fact that there is no depiction of departure from life, only an entrance, and that the exegete says that the Daemon's instruction allows to "attain salvation in Life," σῶζεσθαι ἐν τῷ βίῳ (4.3), which, as the story unfolds, is achieved through an encounter with Eudaemonia. What is most important and decisive regarding the identification of the subject proper of the dialogue is that the meaning of Eudaemonia and salvation are defined only in the context of Life and in relation to the other wanderers whose trajectories span the space between Daemon and Eudaemonia. I argue that despite the tablet being "no political offering," its message is strongly political, and the relation between the wise and the vulgar belongs to its main themes.

The one who achieves Eudaemonia and becomes eudaemonic receives a crown; most importantly, his coronation does not result in a departure from Life to some higher realm but rather in gaining a broader view on life, a view from atop (24.2), which is strictly connected to a fundamental division between the crowned and the uncrowned, ἐστεφανωμένοι and ἀστεφάντοι (27.1). Naturally, one may argue, and perhaps rightfully, that this encrypts a religious division between the initiated and uninitiated; but most importantly it has practical consequences in relation to the ordering of communal life, for life as presented on the tablet is a communal phenomenon, inhabited by many but contemplated by an individual. The status of the eudaemonic

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941c–945e.

<sup>71</sup> Or, as J. V. Luce elegantly phrased it: "At the time of the *Tablet* it was virtually taken for granted that *philosophie* was *religieuse*, but that should not lure us into regarding Cebes as the hierophant . . . of an esoteric doctrine." Luce, review of *Le Tableau de Cébès et la philosophie religieuse*, 39.

individual is described in an almost completely relative manner, in stark contrast to the erring multitude. I shall provide a short summary of these fundamental differences.

Naturally, the erring multitude is living badly, while the eudaemonic one is living well (24.2; 25.1–2); the multitude is described both as fettered (οἷς δέδενται) and wandering or erring (ταράττονται διὰ παντὸς τοῦ βίου) (24.3), and trackless (πλανῶνται ἀνοδία) (27.3), while the eudaemonic one, who achieved an overview of Life, can go (βαδίζει) wherever he wants (ὅπου ἂν βούληται) (26.1). The erring multitude is overpowered by sins (ἄγονται κατακεκρατημένοι) (24.2), while the eudaemonic literally “reigns over everything and is superior to everything from which he previously suffered” (ἀπάντων γὰρ κυριεύει καὶ ἐπάνω πάντων ἐστὶ τῶν πρότερον αὐτὸν λυπούντων) (26.3). The toxic mixture drunk upon entering Life still inflicts suffering on the multitude, while the eudaemonic, purified by the True Paid-eia, is immune and is to those who suffer as a healer to the sick (ὑποδεξόνται γὰρ αὐτὸν ἀσμένως πάντες καθάπερ τὸν ἱατρὸν οἱ πάσχοντες) (26.1). Finally, those who err in Life do so because they have forgotten the instructions given by the Daemon (ἐπελάθοντο γὰρ τὸ παρὰ τοῦ Δαιμονίου πρόσταγμα) (24.3), while, as we can infer from the following discussion (30–32), the instructions practically correspond to the path trodden by the eudaemonic in his ascent toward the peak of Life.

The eudaemonic is undoubtedly in a position of a master, which means not only that he masters his passions, but also that he wields authority over the lower men, to whom he is superior as a physician is superior to the sick. The simplest answer to the question of the source of his authority is that he is educated; but the insufficiency of this answer is obvious from the brilliant criticism of the “propaedeutic” reading of the *Tablet* articulated by scholars such as Joly and Grethlein and Squire. To understand the very nature of this authority we must carefully consider what the author says about False and True Paideia and their respective roles in the depicted ascent.

The ambiguity of what the *Tablet* says about education is well attested and has strongly contributed to its association with the Cynics. This is because scholars and schools are generally presented as the followers of False Paid-eia, while the qualities of those who manage to proceed toward True Paideia and, consequently, Happiness seem less obvious. We learn only that the one who encounters her and her daughters, Ἀλήθεια and Πειθώ, receives a gift of boldness and fearlessness, θάρσος καὶ ἀφοβία, and is then purged with an antidote to the potion of error and ignorance drunk upon entering Life. He

beholds the Abode of the Blessed which, notably, is described as a meadow or grove filled with light, ἄλσος λειμωνοειδῆς καὶ φωτὶ πολλῷ καταλαμπόμενος, which clearly hints at the Platonic descriptions of the beyond from the myth of Er and from the *Phaedrus*.<sup>72</sup>

But we do not see the protagonist of the ascent entering the Abode of the Blessed; in fact, he is beholding it only from below. There is an interesting ambiguity about his location, and the location of the True Paideia. We read that she stands “outside the enclosure,” ἔξω τοῦ περιβόλου, and when the exegete is asked about the reason for this location, he says that it is “because she cures those who arrive and offers them potions of purifying powers” (19.1–2). This is not identical with the statement that the True Paideia stands outside the boundaries of Life—a statement which does not occur anywhere in the *Tablet*—but there is a clear hint at a liminal sphere between Life and the Beyond.

Another hint is being given by the exegete when he describes the encounter with Eudaemonia, a female figure located at the top of the ascent which evokes strong associations with the goddess of Parmenides and κυρία ἀλήθειαν καὶ νοῦν παρασχομένη, a lady who yields truth and understanding, mentioned in the Allegory of the Cave.<sup>73</sup> While the goddess of Parmenides stands behind the gates of Night and Day, Eudaemonia from the *Tablet* is located in the acropolis and seats enthroned in a propylaeum.<sup>74</sup> The notion of acropolis suggests that this sphere somehow belongs to Life, as its highest realm, but the very location of Eudaemonia in a gateway tells that there must be a further realm behind it, of which nothing is said, which clearly indicates the proximity of the Beyond. This is also the place of the coronation; the crowned one, who managed to attain true education and eudaemonia, could therefore be described as somebody who, having recognized the limits of Life, sojourned in the liminal sphere. He is bold and fearless, and is not driven by passions anymore, but masters and contains them, which is clear from the mentions of Self-Mastery (Εγκράτεια) and Containment (Καρτερία).

<sup>72</sup> Plato, *Republic* X 614e2–3: souls “departing to the meadow” (εἰς τὸν λειμῶνα ἀπιούσας); *Republic* X 616b1–3: souls forced to rise up after staying for seven days “in the meadow” (ἐν τῷ λειμῶνι); *Phaedrus* 248b5–c2: souls yearning to see the plain of truth and graze at the “pasture in the meadow beyond” (νομῆ ἐκ τοῦ ἐκεῖ λειμῶνος).

<sup>73</sup> Plato, *Republic* VII 517c4.

<sup>74</sup> Parmenides, DK 1.34–35, 40–46.



## 6. BECOMING DAEMON

We have then identified an initiation into the mystery of life—and life’s boundaries—as a source of authority of the eudaemonic. However, there is another, perhaps even more mysterious source of his authority, also directly linked to Paideia, namely, the art of writing and interpretation. This claim involves a certain risk and ambiguity because whether it is viable depends on the nature of the problematic relation between the intrapictorial and the extrapictorial in the dialogue. The discussed artifact does not represent any acts of writing and interpretation; we note only the instruction, assumedly of written form, held by the Daemon standing upon the gates of Life, and the self-referential mention of the pseudopedagogical γράμματα, which comes up precisely when the exegete’s audience asks about the contents of the instruction.

Squire and Grethlein, when discussing the identification of γράμματα as belonging to Pseudo-Paideia, have argued that “*Tabula Cebetis* provides ‘provisions’ for the journey it describes, but it does not reenact the journey itself.”<sup>75</sup> However, a certain amount of reenactment is definitely at play, and I believe that Markus Hafner’s analysis of the structure of the frame story provides a crucial argument. In his essay about the power of speech in the *Tablet*, Hafner pointed to various rhetorical devices aimed at inducing the reader’s existential commitment to the text, including the frame structure which involves four levels of encounter, the first one being the very encounter of the reader with the text and its author. The second is the encounter of the narrator with the exegete, which takes place in the temple of Kronos in an imprecise past; the third, lying further in the past, is the encounter between the then-young exegete and the sage whom he followed and who hung the tablet in the temple. Finally, there is the intrapictorial encounter between the Daemon and those who enter Life.<sup>76</sup> All this strongly hints at an analogy between the Daemon, the sage, the exegete, and the author of the *Tablet*. Most strikingly, all these encounters, being of pedagogical character, are connected to written or pictorial representation and its exegesis. The Daemon appears with a written instruction; the foreign sage, ξένος, is credited with hanging the tablet in the temple; the exegete is interpreting it; and the author of the dialogue is recounting his interpretation.

<sup>75</sup> Squire and Grethlein, “Counterfeit in Character but Persuasive in Appearance,” 310.

<sup>76</sup> Hafner, “τί ποτε αὐτῆ ἡ μυθολογία δύναται,” 76–77.

Obviously, it is only the intrapictorial level which unambiguously represents an ethical ascent, and this is perhaps why Squire and Grethlein claim that it is not reenacted in the extrapictorial. However, if we remember that the trajectory of the ascent is determined by the Daemon at the gates of Life and Eudaemonia at the top of it, and that Eudaemonia is attained by following the instruction handed out by the Daemon, that is, by acting, according to a certain text, then we must assume that the depicted and interpreted ascent is nothing else but what we may term a lived interpretation, an active embodiment of a written word. Writing and interpreting are absolutely essential to the *Tablet*; the qualification of γράμματα as belonging to the False Paideia does not cancel out their central character.<sup>77</sup>

A further argument for the occurrence of a reenactment—or, to be precise, of a manifold of reenactments being relaunched on the subsequent levels of textual encounters—is that the act of interpretation, either embodied or discursive, is correlated to the act of viewing and, consequently, knowing. The protagonist of the ascent, having encountered the Daemon at the gates of Life, lived according to his instruction and arrived at a view of Life from atop, got to know life. The ξέvoς, who has offered the tablet to the temple and discussed it with the exegete, must have also attained this knowledge, and the frame structure of the dialogue suggests that he may be at least resemblant of the protagonist of the ascent. The same knowledge is passed down by the exegete to his audience in the temple, and, consequently, by the author of the *Tablet* to the reader. Furthermore, this knowledge has a transformative power, which is expressed by the aforementioned analogy of the Daemon, ξέvoς, and the old exegete. The transformation is achieved by the means of exegesis, for he who comprehends it may become an exegete himself, which is obvious from the case of the old sage who has himself once been in a position of the audience of the ξέvoς. But this pertains to all four encounters: the knowledge is bestowed upon the reader by the author who, disguised as the narrator, received it from the old exegete, to whom it was transmitted by the ξέvoς, who brought forth the very tablet and must have learned its meaning. Each of these figures echoes the Daemon standing at the gates of Life—and, according to the logic of the depicted ascent, it is possible to embody the Daemon only after having attained Eudaemonia and climbed the top of Life. The purpose of the ascent, which is both depicted and reenacted discursively, is to become a daemon.

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<sup>77</sup> The exegete says that it is not possible to proceed to the True Paideia without passing through the False one (12.3), although later he holds that it is not necessary to make use of the gifts handed out by the False Paideia (33.5–6).

What does it mean? Let us take recourse to Platonic myths of the beyond. In the *Phaedo* we read that the daemon is an entity which takes care of an individual during his life and leads him to the place of judgment after death.<sup>78</sup> In the myth of Er the daemon is encountered upon entering life, but it is not allotted to a soul; it is rather the soul who chooses its daemon.<sup>79</sup> The soul is sent forth into life in the company of the chosen daemon, who shall oversee the fulfilment of the fate undertaken by the soul upon the entrance.<sup>80</sup> We can therefore assume that the daemon acts as an intermediary and a guide upon the entrance into life and upon the departure, and as a guardian in life, although this function is perhaps least clarified. It is however crucial for the understanding of his role in the *Tablet* since, as I have already argued, its main concern is not the beyond but the issues of earthly life.

The two most famous mentions of the daemon and the daemonic which do not directly pertain to the beyond are found in the *Apology* and the *Symposium*. In the *Apology* Socrates speaks of his inner voice, which he terms δαιμόνιον, while in the *Symposium* Diotima qualifies Eros as a daemon and identifies daemons as intermediaries between gods and men.<sup>81</sup> However, neither of these occurrences are as fitting to the context of the *Tablet* as those which are found in the myth of the golden age mentioned in the *Statesman* and, less extensively, in the fourth book of *Laws*.<sup>82</sup>

I have already hinted at the importance of this myth for the exegesis when commenting upon the choice of Kronos as the patron god of the temple in which the dialogue is set. This myth, as is evident both in the *Statesman* and the *Laws*, does not treat of the beyond but rather of a distant past, the age of Kronos, preceding the age of Zeus, a different age of the world. Men who lived under Kronos enjoyed happiness and abundance, and did not suffer strife nor war nor struggle for power, since they did not form states but were governed directly by god and by daemons, in the same way as the livestock is overseen by the shepherd.<sup>83</sup> The pastoral authority of the daemons is attested

<sup>78</sup> *Phaedo* 107d5–107e; 113d1–2.

<sup>79</sup> *Republic* X 617d6–e1: οὐχ ὑμᾶς δαίμων λήξεται, ἀλλ' ὑμεῖς δαίμονα αἰρήσεσθε (“A daemon will not select you, but you will choose a daemon,” trans. Allan Bloom). This passage is sometimes, in my opinion too hastily, interpreted as inconsistent with phrases ὁ ἐκάστου δαίμων ὅσπερ ζῶντα εἰλήχει (“the daemon of each man, to whom he was allotted when he was alive”) and δαίμων προστεταγμένος (“appointed daemon”) from the *Phaedo*, 107d6 and 108b2.

<sup>80</sup> *Republic* X 620d8–e1.

<sup>81</sup> See Plato, *Apology* 31c4–32a3; *Symposium* 202e3–203a8.

<sup>82</sup> Plato, *Statesman* 268d–274e; *Laws* IV 713c–e.

<sup>83</sup> Plato, *Statesman* 271d–272a.

also in other occurrences of this myth, outside Plato's dialogues, in Hesiod, Theognis, Phocion, and Empedocles.<sup>84</sup>

The *Statesman* features an extensive discussion of the myth, which appears at the very center of the dialogue devoted to the identification of the political man, ὁ πολιτικός, and the political art, τέχνη πολιτική, also termed royal art, τέχνη βασιλική. The myth, along with the pastoral metaphor, is used as a paradigm of wielding authority. This is repeated in the *Laws*, where the Athenian clearly states that

Kronos . . . set up at that time kings and rulers within our cities—not human beings, but demons, members of a more divine and better species. He did just what we do now with sheep and the other tame herd animals. We don't make cattle themselves rulers of cattle, or goats rulers of goats; instead, we exercise despotic dominion over them, because our species is better than theirs.<sup>85</sup>

The paradigmatical character of this myth is made even more clear in a very brief but unambiguous subsequent passage:

The argument thinks that we should imitate by every device the way of life that is said to have existed under Kronos; in public life and in private life—in the arrangement of our households and our cities—we should obey whatever within us partakes of immortality, giving the name “law.”<sup>86</sup>

This is perhaps the best evidence that imitating daemons, and, consequently, imitating god, is crucial for Plato's politics. As pertains to the *Tablet*, I am convinced that the division between the daemons and the men over whom they presided in the age of Kronos is the same as the division between the eudaemonic individual and the multitude, which is indeed compared to livestock: τὸ γὰρ εὐωχεῖσθαι βοσκημάτων τρόπον ἀπόλασιν μεγίστων ἀγαθῶν ἡγοῦνται εἶναι (28.3).<sup>87</sup> Moreover, as proved by the analysis of the frame structure, imitating the daemon is the very aim of the *Tablet*, and the *Tablet* itself could well be seen as a literary device which uses layered techniques of

<sup>84</sup> After the *LSJ* entry, which identifies δαίμονες, inter alia, as “souls of men of the golden age, acting as tutelary deities,” and quotes Hesiod, *Works and Days* 122 and 314, Theognis 1348, Phocion 15, and Empedocles 115.5.

<sup>85</sup> Plato, *Laws* IV 713c8–d3, trans. Thomas Pangle.

<sup>86</sup> Plato, *Laws* IV 713e6–714a2, trans. Pangle.

<sup>87</sup> See *Tablet* 36.1–3 (the eudaemonic as healer) and *Statesman* 268a7–8, where the shepherd is identified as a physician for animals: αὐτὸς τῆς ἀγέλης τροφὸς ὁ βουφορβός, αὐτὸς ἰατρός, αὐτὸς οἶον νυμφευτής (“himself the provider of food to his oxen, himself their physician and their match-maker”).

imitation for the sake of committing its reader to imitate its main figure, the Daemon, concealed within subsequent layers of imitation.<sup>88</sup>

Before proceeding to the final stage of exegesis, we can perhaps risk a historico-philosophical remark concerning the imitation of the daemon. The Platonic *locus classicus* from *Theaetetus* 176b, a call for ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν,<sup>89</sup> assimilation to the god as far as possible, became the main ethical paradigm for the phenomenon known as Middle Platonism, the most important testimonies being found in Eudorus of Alexandria, Philo, Plutarch, Calvenus Taurus, anonymous commentary to the *Theaetetus*, Alcinoüs's *Didaskalikos*, and Apuleius's *De Platone et eius dogmate*.<sup>90</sup> Although Robert Joly, opposing *communis opinio*, argued that the conception of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ is of pre-Platonic and perhaps Pythagorean origin,<sup>91</sup> we can safely assume that its central role in the *Tablet* adds some supporting evidence to the hypothesis proposed by Tadeusz Sinko, that the dialogue may have been written by a Platonist from the second century, such as Gaius, Albinus (Alcinoüs), Apuleius, or Calvenus Taurus.<sup>92</sup> As for the very phrase ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν, one could interpret it precisely as meaning the imitation of the daemon, the much-debated κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν signifying the impossibility of a direct assimilation to god who, as Diotima has it, “does not mingle with men,”<sup>93</sup> and who are therefore in need of daemonic intermediaries.

<sup>88</sup> One may think of Alcibiades comparing Socrates to the statues of sileni which conceal images of a god hidden inside them; see Plato, *Symposium* 215a6–b3. Leo Strauss also refers to this passage when explaining the difference between exoteric and esoteric layer of the text (“Persecution and the Art of Writing,” 36–37).

<sup>89</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus* 176b1–2.

<sup>90</sup> For a general overview of Middle Platonist doctrines see John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977). For the ethical paradigm of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ, see *ibid.*, 43–45, 145, 192, 246, 271, 299–300, 335.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Joly, “Les origines de l’ὁμοίωσις θεῷ,” *Revue belge de Philologie et d’Histoire* 42, no. 1 (1964): 91–95.

<sup>92</sup> Sinko, “De lineamentis Platonicis in Cebetis q.v. tabula,” 29–30. Despite this, there are many well justified objections to this hypothesis. Both Dillon and Sinko accept the identification of Alcinoüs with Albinus, the teacher of Galen, which was proposed by Jacob Freudenthal in 1879 and contested in 1974 (see John Whittaker, “Parisinus Graecus 1962 and the Writings of Albinus,” parts 1 and 2, *Phoenix* 28, nos. 3 and 4 [1974]: 320–54 and 450–56).

<sup>93</sup> Plato, *Symposium* 203a1–2: θεὸς δὲ ἀνθρώπῳ οὐ μίγνυται (“a god does not mingle with a human being,” trans. Seth Benardete).

## 7. MIMESIS, DECEIT, AND POLITICAL WRITING

We have finally arrived at a point where we can identify both the reasons for which the *Tablet* is written esoterically and the mode in which its esotericism operates and holds influence over the intended reader. The allusions to mysteries and eschatological myths, although present in the dialogue, are not the proper source of its esotericism. It is rather the radical division between the eudaemonic individual and the vulgar multitude, which must remain concealed from the eyes of the lower men who, as the exegete says right before comparing them to livestock, hate the True Paideia and imprecate her: εὐθὺς κακῶς λέγουσι καὶ τὴν Παιδεΐαν καὶ τοὺς ἐκεῖσε βαδίζοντας (28.2).<sup>94</sup>

Authors who have recourse to the art of esoteric writing address their texts neither to “the unphilosophic majority nor the perfect philosopher as such, but the young men who might become philosophers.” Their compositions allow for a particular dynamic of concealment and revelation, so that they do not “disturb the slumber of those who cannot see the wood for the trees, but act as awakening stumbling blocks for those who can.”<sup>95</sup> Reading and interpreting an esoteric text can be conceived of as a practice of philosophical initiation, by which one may become a philosopher, and, as we learn from Socrates, being a philosopher is inextricably connected with certain daemonic activities and requires a spiritual awakening.<sup>96</sup> This is precisely why the author of the *Tablet* wants the reader to become existentially committed to the text and its daemonic powers, which are to be understood not as tools being at his disposal, but rather as latent inner powers of the very reader himself. For given the fact that the daemon is not a separate entity but a guardian ascribed to an individual or a soul wandering through earthly life and the beyond,<sup>97</sup> the imitation in question is not to be understood as some

<sup>94</sup> Note the incoherence between this passage and 26.1–3, where the exegete says that the eudaemonic will be welcome by the lower men as a healer by the sick. This is perhaps only a relative incoherence, for the imprecations mentioned in 28.1 are not at odds with the metaphor of the healer but only with how the reaction of the sick was depicted. See Plato, *Republic* VII 516e8–517a6. See also Strauss, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” 36: “Exoteric literature presupposes that there are basic truths which would not be pronounced in public by any decent man, because they would do harm to many people who, having been hurt, would naturally be inclined to hurt in turn him who pronounces the unpleasant truths.”

<sup>95</sup> Strauss, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” 36.

<sup>96</sup> For daemonic activities see the above-mentioned passages from the *Apology* (31c4–32a3) and the *Symposium* (202e3–203a8). The spiritual awakening is most classically described in the *Republic* VII 521c6–8: ψυχῆς περιαγωγή ἐκ νυκτερινῆς τινος ἡμέρας εἰς ἀληθινήν, τοῦ ὄντος οὐσαν ἐπάνοδον, ἣν δὴ φιλοσοφίαν ἀληθῆ φήσομεν εἶναι (“the turning of a soul around from a day that is like night to the true day; it is that ascent to what *is* which we shall truly affirm to be philosophy,” trans. Bloom).

<sup>97</sup> See the above-mentioned passage from the *Phaedo* 107d5–107e1, and *Republic* X 617d–e, 620d–e.

sort of transformation into another entity, but as living up to one's chosen fate.

The esoteric device both conceals the presupposed political division and reproduces it by revealing it to those who, by the act of reading and interpreting, achieve the ability to grasp it. The intended reader should graduate into future exegete or author; thus the *Tablet's* esotericism is of an essentially educational character, and, to our surprise, the most straightforward identification of the dialogue as a pedagogical text turns out to be the most insightful, but only if we stress that it is an education of the true philosopher that is at stake.

The education of a philosopher, as described by Plato, consists of proceeding from falsehood to truth and results in an attempt at a rational ordering of the city—even if it is but a city which “has its place in speeches” and does not exist “anywhere on earth.”<sup>98</sup> All this relies on imitation: education itself consists of imitating the teacher; falsehood is often conceived as a flawed imitation of truth, and the political order championed by the philosopher should imitate the order of reason. Finally, the very mode of presentation of these ideas, the philosophical dialogue, is of a mimetic character, and Plato makes it explicit in a self-reflexive statement found in the *Laws*:

As for what they call the “serious” poets, our tragic poets, suppose some of them should at some time come to us and ask something like this: “Strangers, shall we frequent your city and territory or not? And shall we carry and bring along our poetry, or what have you decided to do about such matters?” What kind of a reply regarding these matters would we correctly give to the divine men? For my part, I think it should be as follows: “Best of strangers,” we should say, “we ourselves are poets, who have to the best of our ability created a tragedy that is the most beautiful and the best; at any rate, our whole political regime is constructed as the imitation of the most beautiful and best way of life [μίμησις τοῦ καλλίστου καὶ ἀρίστου βίου], which we at least assert to be really the truest tragedy. Now you are poets, and we too are poets of the same things; we are your rivals as artists and performers of the most beautiful drama, which true law alone can by nature bring to perfection—as we hope.”<sup>99</sup>

Let us return to the gates of Life as depicted on the tablet discussed in the eponymous dialogue. We have devoted considerable attention to the Daemon; however, he is not the sole figure encountered by those who are about

<sup>98</sup> Plato, *Republic* IX 592a11–b1, trans. Bloom.

<sup>99</sup> Plato, *Laws* VII 817a2–c1, trans. Pangle.

to enter. There is also Deceit, enthroned and handing out the potion of error and ignorance.

As the Daemon structurally corresponds to Eudaemonia, so is Deceit mirrored by Paideia, who hands out the antidote to the aforementioned potion. The encounter with Paideia precedes the encounter with Eudaemonia in a symmetrical manner to Deceit appearing straight after the Daemon; finally, the passage from False to True Paideia requires shaking off the illusion induced by Deceit.

Squire and Grethlein strongly insist upon the affinity of the False Paideia and Deceit, and correspondingly identify the text itself as belonging to the False Paideia. Naturally, there is textual evidence for such a claim; however, having analyzed the pedagogical dynamics of the dialogue, I would rather propose that γράμματα, despite being deceptive, are *par excellence* pedagogical, since they foster passage from False Paideia to the true one.<sup>100</sup> Writing and interpretation belong to this movement as they constitute the dynamics of concealment and revelation, of shaking off an illusion in an attempt to find a more perfect imitation of truth, but also, on the other hand, of creating illusions which are not to be overcome by those who will not fulfil the ascent and who will remain with the multitude. Or, to express it exegetically, overcoming deceit is not equivalent with destroying it; moreover, it induces the eudaemonic to reproduce deceit for the sake of maintaining the esoteric device.<sup>101</sup>

The path of philosophical education, portrayed in the *Tablet*, is portrayed esoterically because of its essential connection with the question of authority: it is an education aimed at producing eudaemonic individuals, masters of life, who, being fearless in search of the truth, have overcome deceit and are capable of passing down knowledge of life by crafting imitations, that is, as Squire and Grethlein have it, casting “mimetic spells,”<sup>102</sup> thereby reasserting the division between those who are to be deceived—out of their own inability

<sup>100</sup> As is precisely stated by the exegete (33.4): χρήσιμα μέντοι ἐστὶ πρὸς τὸ συντομωτέπως ἐλθεῖν.

<sup>101</sup> Squire and Grethlein pay particular attention to the description of Deceit as “counterfeit in character” and “persuasive in appearance” (γυνὴ πεπλασμένη τῷ ἦθει καὶ πιθανῇ φαινομένη, 5.1). They point to the semantics of πλάσσω, which includes “forming images,” and to its use in Plato’s dialogues, usually in the context of creating stories or imaginary representations (*Phaedrus* 246c, *Republic* II 377b). They insist that these uses are of negative connotations. Squire and Grethlein, “Counterfeit in Character but Persuasive in Appearance,” 303–4. However, the above-quoted passage of the *Laws* shows that Plato’s valuation of fiction and representation is not unambiguous, not to mention extensive discussions of the status of rhetoric from the *Phaedrus* or the *Gorgias*.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.



to follow the daemon—and those who will fearlessly overcome illusion in their striving for truth.

In the myth of Er the souls who are to cast lots and choose their fate before entering life are being told that “the blame belongs to him who chooses; god is blameless.”<sup>103</sup> The blamelessness of the superior holds true for the *Tablet*, too: daemon is blameless for the torments of the multitude that fails to follow his instruction, the exegete is blameless for eventual lack of comprehension on the part of his audience and, consequently, so is the author. The depicted political division is not constructed, but rather recognized as a fact.

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<sup>103</sup> Plato, *Republic* X 617e4–5: αἰτία ἐλομένου. θεὸς ἀναίτιος. Trans. Bloom.

