

Descending to the Underworld

The semantics of the *anabasis/katabasis* motifs in Plato's *Republic*

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In *Republic II* Glaukon narrates a story about Gyges, a shepherd tending the flocks of the Lydian king (359d-360b). After an earthquake had exposed a subterranean chamber Gyges went down the chasm. There to his surprise he came across the corpse of a giant. When he climbed up again he was wearing on his finger the dead man's magic ring, one that made its owner invisible. Gyges took full advantage of the ring's powers in his way to usurping the throne of Lydia. That he did by both committing adultery with the queen and assassinating the king.

Republic VII opens with the memorable parable of the Cave. This is a story about the life of a group of men imprisoned in a subterranean cave-dwelling. Since they wore chains on the neck, hands, and feet, they could only look straight ahead at a parade of figures formed on the cave's wall. When one of them manages to break his bondage and starts climbing his way up, he finds out that those figures were nothing but two-dimensional shadows of three-dimensional objects. He also realises that he had been living under the real world all along. But if he were willing to return to the cave, bring the news to his former fellow-prisoners and set them free, out of disbelief the latter will resist fiercely up to the point of killing him.

The final section of the *Republic* is occupied by the eschatological myth of Er (614b-621d). This is purportedly a narration of the postmortem experience of a soldier killed in action. Shortly before the cremation of his corpse he came back from the dead and told those present about everything he had seen and heard in the Underworld. The Meadow of the souls, the punishment of the evildoers, the choice of lives, the plain of Forgetfulness, all construct a breath-taking picture.

In the present paper I propose to examine the phaenomenology of *anabasis/katabasis* motifs in these three narrative units so that the textual function of the motifs may be revealed. There follows a number of those interpretive parameters constitutive of my comparative reading of these sections. It is of importance, to beginwith, that the fate of the main characters in all stories changes: a shepherd usurps the throne, a prisoner is set free, a dead wakes up alive and kicking. Similarly, the place of descent is identified in all three cases as a *topos* of death. Finally, the manner and degree of divine presence or absence suggests itself as a significant authorial device.