



**Arnold Jafe**

University of Warsaw, Poland

ORCID 0000-0003-4503-491X

## The “lengthy affair” of mytho-poetic education: Plato’s myths, Heidegger’s hermeneutics, and learning with(out) violence

**Abstract:** This article retrieves ancient and modern perspectives on the status and role of myth in education by revisiting Plato’s critique of myth in the light of recent scholarship and spotlighting Plato’s so-called “allegory of the cave,” particularly the latter’s (in)famous interpretation by Martin Heidegger. Reviving the question of myth in the philosophy of education through engaging Plato and Heidegger’s mythical elements, the paper provides a more extensive background to recent deliberations on mytho-poetic curriculum theory and the hermeneutics of education.

**Keywords:** Plato, Plato’s Cave, Myth, Heidegger, Hermeneutics, Education, Mytho-Poetic

“In fact, it is possible that the world of myth...  
will open up a completely different hermeneutical problematic.”

(Gadamer, 2007, p.140)

### Introduction

In the beginning was the word: μῦθος, “myth.” At one of the original cornerstones of Western philosophy in general, and the philosophy of education in particular, namely in Plato’s *Republic*, “myth” was named and critiqued as a problematic kind of narrative discourse and objectionable heritage of stories and teachings which could only partially be allowed into

the ideal educational curriculum with great caution, heavy censorship, and even secrecy and purifying rituals, all to be overseen by a philosophical elite (Plato, 1997, 377b-378e). Even the primordial bedrocks of ancient Hellenic culture and education, Homer and Hesiod, were not to be spared. Prefacing his critique of myths and their popular makers and tellers (poets and women), Socrates insisted with divine reference on the indispensability of discussing the ideal philosophically-oriented education in which mythical stories become an issue: “Then, by god, Adeimantus, I said, we mustn’t leave it out, even if it turns out to be a somewhat lengthy affair... Come, then, and just as if we had the leisure to make up stories [μύθοι], let’s describe in theory. [λόγος] how to educate our men” (Plato, 1997, 376d)<sup>1</sup>. The ensuing discussion of myth did indeed turn out to be a “lengthy affair”: the dialogue on μῦθοι and their making, telling, and censoring (μυθοποίησις, μυθολογία) takes up the remainder of the second book of the *Republic* and extends deep into the third; moreover, the problematization of μῦθος which Plato’s writing historically inaugurated would become one of the “lengthiest affairs” of all, one which persists to this day in the tension of interpreting the relationship between μῦθος and λόγος, or translating and understanding such to be between Myth and Philosophy in the wake of Plato’s thinking and wording. This lengthy affair could not have unfolded otherwise by virtue of its original qualifications, namely, Plato’s Socrates’ own admission that mythical stories are “false, on the whole, though they have some truth in them” (Plato, 1997, 377a), his ultimate allowance of censored myths in the education of the πόλις, and the abundance of myths, mythical references, and mythical settings — both traditional ones and creatively, pointedly authored ones — with which Plato’s dialogues philosophize. Moreover, in the seventh book of the *Republic*, when Socrates proposes to “compare the effect of education and of the lack of it on our nature” (Plato, 1997, 514a), he proceeds to philosophize through a story which, although he does not call it such, is in Platonic terms as well as for most modern frameworks recognizably a myth: the myth of the Cave.

Plato’s Cave (presented in *Republic* 514a–520a), one of the perpetually transmitted and most revisited myths in the history of philosophy, is virtually

---

<sup>1</sup> “ἴθι οὖν, ὥσπερ ἐν μύθῳ μυθολογοῦντές τε καὶ σχολὴν ἄγοντες λόγῳ παιδεύωμεν τοὺς ἄνδρας.” The “making up” or “telling” of “stories” which Socrates says per this popular translation, “μύθῳ μυθολογοῦντές,” is a construction which emphasizes the particularity of speaking in/of μῦθος, and the “describing education in theory” is a rather hefty translation of “λόγῳ παιδεύωμεν,” which one classic translation renders as “educate in our discourse,” i.e., in the philosophers’ λόγος (Adams, 1902, 376d).

universally referred to as the “allegory of the cave,” as if it were somehow safe from the realm of myth. However, in *Republic* Book II and elsewhere, Plato explicitly rejects the allegorical interpretation of myths. He seems to imply that myths, including those allowed through philosophical-pedagogical censor, are to be conceived, told, received, and “let be” in some different way proper to them as μῦθοι, as stories of a peculiar type and charge. More than two millennia later, something along these lines was intuited or hinted at in one of the most inspirited and controversial modern endeavors to (re) interpret Plato’s Cave, namely that of the 20th-century German philosopher and educator Martin Heidegger. Heidegger revisited Plato’s Cave in a number of lectures which he continuously re-read, revised, and cross-cited. In the edition of his *On the Essence of Truth* lectures on Plato’s Cave notably revised and delivered during his term as Rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933-34, Heidegger devoted part of the introductory session to emphasizing that what is “known by the name of ‘the allegory of the cave’”<sup>2</sup> is in fact “the telling of a μῦθος,” and that “the myth of the ‘allegory of the cave’ [*Mythos vom «Höhlengleichnis»*]” is “the single center of Platonic philosophizing,” for “Plato always speaks in μῦθος when his philosophizing wants to say something essential with the greatest intensity” (Heidegger, 2010, pp. 97-98). Prefacing his entry into Plato’s Cave, Heidegger remarked (2010, p. 97): “Here we also have an opportunity to see how, in later Greek philosophy, μῦθος once again thrusts itself forward besides the λόγος that is appropriate to philosophy. This can only be a sign that we stand in a decisive transition here, *decisive for two thousand years.*” Heidegger’s insistence that Plato’s educational Cave must be appreciated precisely as a myth is significant not only within the context of his own repeated grappling with Plato’s Cave and the notion of myth (Arnold, 2022), but even more so from the perspective of how Heidegger’s interpretation of the Cave takes up the imperative for which Socrates originally castigated μῦθος, while recognizing and allowing

---

<sup>2</sup> Question-worthy throughout the English translations of Heidegger’s *On the Essence of Truth lectures* (Heidegger, 2010; Heidegger 2013), particularly the 1933-34 edition in which “myth” is evoked, is the rendering of *Gleichnis* as “allegory.” Perhaps the translators wished to avoid the Biblical association of the common translation as “parable,” and were also conscious that rendering *Gleichnis* as “simile” loses the connection with the story quality of myth, with simile’s concern of “likeness” furthermore becoming problematic in the context of Platonic metaphysics. At any rate, nowhere does Heidegger use the term “*Allegorie*,” and even “*Gleichnis*” is often bracketed with scare quotes. Additionally, the translators take note of Heidegger’s rich wordplay with *Geschichte* as “history” and “story,” but more often elect to go with the former.

for preserving its “partial truth”: the imperative of truthful, philosophically-attuned, ontologically transformative education.

Between Plato and Heidegger, the essence of the visionary notion of education unfolding with(in) the mythical Cave, or the Cave as μῦθος, becomes a question of interpretation, a hermeneutic question *par excellence*. The present essay revisits the question of myth and education with Plato, Heidegger, and contemporary “mytho-poetic” curricular theories to highlight the promises and challenges of mythical education, which Plato, in the end, did not dare to expel from the πόλις, which Heidegger retrieved in philosophical-hermeneutic enactment, and which more recent contributions have taken up in conversation on the hermeneutics of education.

### **Going through stories: the hermeneutics of myth between Plato and Heidegger**

In recent decades, the relationship between μῦθος and λόγος, or between myth and philosophy, both synoptic and diachronic, has been repeatedly revisited and reinterpreted by a diverse range of scholars operating within widely differing disciplines and traditions. In search of an original, cumulative, comparative, or deconstructed meaning — or lack thereof — of the word and notion “myth” in the wake of the archaic Greek μῦθος, some scholars have traced the decisive inception back to Plato. In contrast, others have denounced the study of “myth,” including even in the ancient Hellenic context, as an ideological chimera. Between numerous “theories of myth,” whether those advocating, denying, or claiming merely to contextualize their defined matter at hand, “myth” has since Plato come to name, at the very least, a violent history<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> In a hermeneutic sense, “violence” always names a tension of horizons: on the one hand, a “violent interpretation” is one that coerces a text to reinforce or collapse against one interpretation or any other interpretations, denying not only the text but other interpretations their own voice (Wierciński, 2019, 293). On the other hand, as Heidegger (1997, 137-138) articulated on one occasion, any authentic interpretation that goes beyond reproducing what has already been said necessarily uses “violence” in that it “drives” and “takes out” significance which is not immediately apparent or was even left unsaid, therefore involving a certain “going against” what the author and previous interpreters might have seen themselves as saying. In the case of the history of the interpretation of myth, this violence is abundant and sharp, ranging from aggressive denials of the very existence of myth or the renunciation of whatever myth might have to say in any case, to numerous and grand “theories of myth” claiming to identify a singular, universal hermeneutic key that “explains” myth once and for all. By thematizing “violence,” hermeneutics thematizes the horizons of understanding and interpreting and

According to the meticulous, seminal philological studies of Luc Brisson (1998; 2004), Plato can be seen as the first to definitively, systematically “coin” μῦθος as meaning a story, a narrative discourse, which conveys a community’s traditions, values, and worldview. In the Republic passages under consideration here, Plato particularly criticized the traditional reservoir of Greek myths for being violent and impious (Plato, 1997, 378b). Brisson interprets that Plato defined myth while consistently grouping such demarcated stories under a common evaluative set of five critical characteristics: myths (1) convey information that is unverifiable and “beyond”; (2) are subject to change over the course of transmissions and renditions, leading to inconsistencies and anachronistic, seemingly scandalous details; (3) are presented in the (often anthropomorphic) images and behaviors of the sensible world; (4) take the form of storytelling, which incites action and reaction, not deduction or argumentation; and accordingly (5) affect behavior and beliefs, not intellect and reason, through a participational style of *mimesis* that is analogous to magical incantations and play (Brisson, 1998; 2004). Brisson, therefore, contends that when Plato speaks of and in μῦθος, he is simultaneously engaged in outlining and critiquing a form of narrative that is inferior to the λόγος of philosophy but which nevertheless plays “for ordinary people a role similar to that of an intelligible form for the philosopher,” hence Plato’s allowance that certain (philosophically censored) myths can “in both ethics and politics... take the place of philosophical discourse” (Brisson, 1998, pp. 116-17). That myths may substitute for philosophical λόγος as long as they go through philosophical crafting is the other side of the coin of Plato’s rejection of allegorical interpretations of myths and his coining of μυθολογία, “mythology.” According to Brisson, by μυθολογία Plato meant the telling of a myth that has been preliminarily subjected to “fabrication,” “elaboration,” “interpretation,” and “inquiry.” (Brisson, 1998, pp. 147-152). Yet, the admission that “mythology” is to be left as it is, “spared” still as stories (μύθοι), and not quasi-philosophically mobilized into a repository of elements for accounting and “translating” into other discourse(s), discloses the productive ambiguity of Plato’s “determining” of myth(-ology). For all of its faults, myth conveys matters to the soul. How myth does so, takes philosophy to appreciate, or summons philosophy to interpret, yet such rationalizing and intellectualizing despoils the dynamic story-quality of myth that already speaks to us before philosophical framing.

---

cultivates a sensitivity to the original meaningfulness of a text or phenomenon which lends to the interpretation of meaning.

In effect, without myth, the possibility for educating people — or for “something,” as Plato says analogously of artistic works, “to strike their eyes and ears like a breeze that brings good health from a good place, leading them unwittingly, from childhood on, to resemblance, friendship, and harmony with the beauty of reason” (Plato, 1997, 401c-d) — would be absent from the city except for its ostensibly “post-mythological” philosophical elite. When it comes to the realms of ethics and politics, Brisson suggests that the thinking at the core of Plato’s “sparing” of myth is that myth is the first persuasion in the direction of philosophical education, the “only alternative to violence,” which nevertheless “allows, within the human soul, for the preeminence of reason” (Brisson, 1998, 121).

The latter quotation is altogether question-provoking. Given the above rediscovery of Plato’s “coining” of μῦθος *vis-à-vis* λόγος, how does myth allow for the “preeminence of reason?” Did it not follow that myth is an inferior substitute for reasoning, a mere persuasive storytelling employed before or in the absence of philosophical education? Does not Plato’s rejection of allegory preclude that there is any “reason” to be “deciphered” within myth as if λόγος were merely an appendage to some truth inherently coded in any μῦθος? Moreover, why does Brisson (1998, p. 121) instate such a rigid division between myth and education when Plato in the *Republic* deliberates “mythology” precisely for education?

Myth is not only a lexeme which Plato uses and delineates in certain ways to be deciphered by philologists, but is a fundamental dimension of Plato’s philosophizing as such. This affirmation is the testimony brought forth not only by the sheer saturation of the dialogues with myths and mythical references (whose significance cannot be anachronistically reduced to some “cultural hangover”), but also by the perspectives of recent Plato scholarship. The mythical immersion of Plato’s dialogues as whole echoes what Benjamin Jowett once remarked on the *Timaeus*: “We cannot tell (nor could Plato himself have told) where the figure or myth ends, and the philosophical truth begins” (quoted in Murray, 1999, p. 251). As Penelope Murray points out in her contribution to the seminal volume *From Myth to Reason? Studies in the Development of Greek Thought*, “the dialogues themselves are stories... which also share some of the characteristics of his [Plato’s] mythical narratives” (Murray, 1999, p. 260). If Brisson read Plato as allowing for the substitution of myth for philosophizing in the realms of ethics and politics, then more recent studies have cogently illustrated how Plato employed both traditional myths and his own μυθολογία or “philosophical myth” to preface, intertwine with, paraphrase, or substitute for supposedly inalienable philosophical

discourse<sup>4</sup>. Echoing Jowett’s remark, Kathryn Morgan’s milestone study *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato* submits that Plato leads us to “discover that, in the end, it is almost impossible to distinguish a sufficiently advanced philosophical myth from a philosophical theory. All language, even theoretical language, is a story that interprets reality” (Morgan, 2000, p. 14). Morgan’s study introduces a hermeneutic breakthrough. In Plato, the arrangement of μῦθος and λόγος is not a stable contrast of universally opposite modes of discourse requiring only “bracketing” distinction. It is rather a dynamic interpenetration, whereby Plato’s dialogues thematize the question of the limits of “rationalizing” language and bring into the relief the ceaseless ordeal of interpreting between story and theory, (re)telling and thinking. Mythology (μυθολογία) “must therefore take its place as an intimate and essential part of the Platonic philosophical project,” or in the words of Morgan’s conclusion, “*Mythos* is the condition of the world we inhabit” (Morgan, 2000, pp. 289, 291). In the wake of Morgan’s underscoring of the “dynamic interdependence” of Platonic myth and philosophy, Omid Tofighian’s *Myth and Philosophy in Platonic Dialogues* speaks of their “mutual scaffolding” (Tofighian, 2016, p. xii), and explores how the diversity of Plato’s myths, their forms, functions, and interpretative contexts, and the reflectivity provoked in distinguishing them, discloses the imperative of “polymythic hermeneutics”: “A hermeneutics appropriate for Plato’s use of myth accepts different stories, encourages multiple forms of interpretation, and allows various definitions to modify, change, merge, and transform... within an inclusive horizon that accommodates unconstrained narratives voicing many different things” (Tofighian, 2016, pp. 217, 218).

These emerging retrievals of Plato’s “mythological philosophizing” are decisively hermeneutic in the Gadamerian sense of bringing the search for descriptions and definitions back into reflecting on understanding and interpreting as transformative events. Revitalizing the dynamism of Plato’s thinking and writing, μῦθος and μυθολογία are transformed from a question of substantive definitions and competing demarcations into a thematizing of understanding of the horizons of interpreting what is happening when one speaks of or in myth. It is in this sense that we will now turn to discern how Martin Heidegger’s interpretation of Plato’s Cave “rediscovers” a vision of mythical education as a happening of truth (*Geschehen der Wahrheit*).

---

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the studies discussed in particular below, see: Plato, 2004; Collobert, 2012.

This brings us to Heidegger's introduction to his 1933-34 lectures on Plato's Cave, in the final lines of which he emphasized to his students:

The μῦθος speaks of a story—and in order to understand it, it is essential that we actually go through the story ourselves... Therefore, for you, authentic understanding of the μῦθος does not depend, in the first instance, upon whether you understand Greek well or badly or at all; it does not depend on whether you know much or little or nothing at all about Plato; rather, it depends on this alone: whether you are ready to take seriously the fact that you are sitting here in the lecture hall of a German university—that is, whether something unavoidable, something that has an enduring effect, speaks to you in the story of the underground cave that is to be interpreted (Heidegger, 2010, p. 98).

In this opening appeal, Heidegger expresses an essential characteristic not only of his interpretation of Plato's Cave in particular, but of his post-*Being and Time* thinking and teaching in general, which he later formulated in his lecture *Time and Being* thusly: "The point is not to listen to a series of propositions, but rather to follow the movement of showing" (Heidegger, 1972, p. 2). Instead of imposing a strict analytical framework, Heidegger wants to engage in traveling through a story as it unfolds, in thinking along with a dynamic movement of shifting disclosures through which something more primordial than argumentative propositioning is happening to the reader as they understand themselves with(in) the story. Heidegger's reading of Plato's Cave is, like the extensive close readings of philosophical and poetic texts which constituted much of his thinking and teaching in the 1930s, a hermeneutics in enactment (*Hermeneutik im Vollzug*). Heidegger repeatedly highlights this approach throughout his lectures on Plato's Cave: In the first part, he stresses that "This means that what is decisive is the whole course of the happening; our own Dasein should participate in completing this course, and should thus undergo movement itself" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 102); later on, posing the question of what the myth of the Cave reveals of the essential nature of being human, Heidegger reiterates: "We could not yet decide what man is (as viewed now from the allegory [*Gleichnis*] of the cave). This we can decide only if we participate in the entire 'story'... So if man wants to know who he is, he *himself* must engage in the *movement* of these questions and become unsettled" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 136). According to Heidegger, only through such an attentive "adherence" to going through the mythical story-character of Plato's Cave can "we derive the fundamental character of philosophical Being from the allegory [*Gleichnis*]" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 143).



The conceptual groundwork of Heidegger’s enacted hermeneutics is to be found in his fundamental-ontological analysis of understanding and interpreting in *Being and Time*, in his attempt to notionalize the “Historic-Happening of Being” or “Onto-History” (*Seynsgeschichte*) alongside his close poetic and philosophical readings over the 1930s, and in what scholars like Michael Erhmantraut and Iain Thompson have retrieved as Heidegger’s envisioned “ontological revolution” of philosophic pedagogy<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, Heidegger’s reading of Plato’s Cave continues to be widely held to be a case of violent and untenable eisegesis that may be expunged through sensitive philology<sup>6</sup>. This predominant view of Heidegger’s cave is mostly concerned with Heidegger’s argument that the primordial Greek notion of truth, ἀλήθεια, as a dynamic happening of concealment, *Verborgenheit*, and unconcealment, *Unverborgenheit*, is subtly corrupted in Plato’s Cave into the modern senses of correctness of representation — a claim which virtually all scholars deny. In his interpretation of Plato’s Cave, however, Heidegger is also, or perhaps foremostly, showing that Plato’s Cave myth, the movement of the story itself, unfolds, happens as precisely this truthful dynamic of disclosing and concealing.

One of the essential truths of the “fundamental character of philosophical Being from the *Glechnis*” that Heidegger sees disclosed in moving through the story of Plato’s Cave myth is παιδεία, “education.” Through the course of moving up and out of the cave, Heidegger interprets the Greek παιδεία to mean “education” in a more profound and authentic — ontological — sense than the modern concept. παιδεία is not “merely pouring knowledge into the unprepared soul as if it were a container held out empty and waiting” but is transformative of the soul, “leading us to the place of our essential being and accustoming us to it” (Heidegger, 1998, p. 167). This

---

<sup>5</sup> See Palmer, 1969; Thomson, 2002; Ehrmantraut, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Eisegesis as reading preconceived notions into a text has its double in the “philological” presumption that there is already a preconceived, more or less established arrangement of fixed notions within the text that can be reliably, empirically extracted to disprove others. Wierciński (2019, 293) draws out the dynamic tension with exegesis as the reading of meaning out of a text which addresses and shapes a reader’s intuitive feeling and critical interpreting, hence interpreting becomes with Heidegger an historic-happening (*Geschichte*, *Geschehen*), part of the “History of Being” (*Seinsgeschichte*) and with Gadamer the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) in-between the interpreter and the text as an event of understanding. The tension between eisegesis and exegesis is itself a matter of interpreting, and it is this that Heidegger explicitly thematizes in his reading of Plato’s Cave, even if he remains seen as ultimately invested in eisegesis.

“leading” and “accustoming” is a movement, a transformation, “an *innermost change in the Being of man*” (Heidegger, 2010, 157). Through the unfolding of the story of one’s education, the human being takes on, and moves forth with, in the words of Andrzej Wierciński, the “ability to experience some specific existential tension that accompanies our constant discovery of the beautiful and very varied world,” an “event that keeps a human being in a state of readiness for constant transformation” (Wierciński, 2019, pp. 324, 325). It is in this dynamic, happening experience of thinking through the story of one’s educational journey that education promises knowledge, that is knowledge in Heidegger’s words as “gaining a foothold and standpoint in the openness of things and their happening” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 182). Likewise, as Heidegger emphasizes, the escaped prisoner’s return to those left at the bottom of the cave cannot end with conveying information to them but by making them go through the movement of the story themselves. The latter, Heidegger tells us, is the imperative of the philosopher-pedagogue.

Moreover, the violence that Plato (and not only Plato) saw as problematic in myths is curiously refracted in the plot of the Cave myth. The first prisoner who finds their way out of the cave did not do so voluntarily, but was rather forced to, at each step coerced to endure the pain of the blinding sights, bewildering realizations, and arduous climb into an unknown world that contrast the comfortable seating and flickering slideshow back down below. Yet, Heidegger insists that this violent act of forcing the prisoner to stand up is only the beginning: the whole journey up the different levels of the cave is a continued compulsion. This continued enacting of violence, as opposed to a singular act, becomes further charged when the liberated prisoner realizes that he, too, heading back into the cave, will have to force his fellows to make their ascent. Only at this stage is the prisoner “liberated” not only from the cave, but from the violence enacted upon him, which he too must employ to liberate. All along the way, violence is not simply exerted, but is responded to with endurance and courage. In parallel to this process, Heidegger emphasizes that the liberation of the prisoner is also the entire process, not one act or stage. Heidegger therefore speaks of the experience of the Cave as a “violent liberation and the highest obligation” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 162). When traversed as a story, this “violent liberation” underscored by Heidegger and inlaid by Plato in the cave myth, reveals its double side: the mythical story itself is the alternative to actual violence, and appreciation of endurance becomes a part of our being as we imagine ourselves to be going through the painful, unfamiliar, demanding ascent. In effect, what Heidegger calls the “violent liberation” at work in Plato’s Cave myth is about

persistently compelling ourselves to challenge and ask about ourselves on the way of disclosure. This “violence” is not only or not so much an act that we resist or surrender to by committing to go through Plato’s Cave, but a force to which we respond that leads us on a demanding journey that we undergo as the truthful story of our education’s unsettling of ourselves. The liberation of gaining “access to beings” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 135) is most authentically the undertaking, the happening, the historic story of awakening our being, the transformative turning of the soul that is the twisting and turning of the education in/of Plato’s Cave.

Heidegger’s storytelling of Plato’s Cave is concerned with attuning us to such “happening” with(in) Plato’s Cave as the essence of truthful education, whose transformative philosophical potential remains despite changing definitions and philologies of truth or allegorical interpretations. Through the myth of Plato’s Cave, in moving with it as a story that demands our participation and affects our very essence, Heidegger explored and facilitated the hermeneutic experience of mytho-poetic education. It is from this perspective that myth, μῦθος, for Heidegger “is that word that indicates this and that about the entirety of human Dasein. It is not the word in which human beings give their account of things [like λόγος], but rather the word that gives them a directive” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 91)<sup>7</sup>. In Plato’s Cave, Heidegger tells and shows us, “the originary λόγος of philosophy remains bound to μῦθος” (2010, p. 92). With Heidegger, thus, the (re)turn to retrieve the philosophical-educational truth of Plato’s Cave is a return to the hermeneutics of mythical education, to rediscovering the “directive” of myth.

---

<sup>7</sup> While interpreting Heidegger’s notion of the “directive” (*Weisung*) of myth goes far beyond the present scope, it might be worth citing the recent edition of the *Historical Dictionary of Heidegger’s Philosophy*: “A directive is a guideline for thinking, a way of leading it along its proper path. Such a directive is neither a product of human thought nor a rational principle, but instead arises through the reciprocal relation between being and thinking and the manner in which the former calls or addresses the latter. A directive implies a grounding attunement, which acclimates thinking and makes it receptive to the voice of being. The need for such a directive is a throwback to the manner in which hermeneutic phenomenology requires guiding precepts to ‘lay out’ or interpret the structures of care, and, ultimately, the horizon for any possible understanding of being.” (Schalow, 2020, p. 106)

## **The stories that we are: mytho-poetic curriculum and the hermeneutics of education**

Perhaps to Plato's irony, or more importantly as a testimony to the "lengthy affair" of the hermeneutics of myth and education that began in his dialogues, the recent research program and publication *Our Mythical Education: The Reception of Classical Myth Worldwide in Formal Education* (Maurice, 2021) has illustrated how traditional ancient myths have been continuously present in modern educational curricula around the world in diverse settings and disciplinary and ideological contexts. While myths have survived (and not only merely "survived") in education over the centuries, pedagogical reflection on myth is a more recent development in Anglophone scholarship attributable to James Bradley Macdonald, particularly in the wake of the latter's encounter with the hermeneutics of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur. In his 1981 essay "Theory, Practice and the Hermeneutic Circle," Macdonald (1995) contended that the dominant twin paradigms of what he called positivist "control theory" and political "critical theory" do not account for the hermeneutic process that is the "reality of education" and the hermeneutic circle that is the quest of curriculum theory. Macdonald, therefore, proposed as a third paradigm the "mytho-poetic imagination," which thematizes the personal awareness, poetic insight, visualization, imagination, astonishment, and mystery that are all involved in the ontological happening of understanding and interpreting meaning in-between science and praxis. Mytho-poetic imagination is the curricular realization of exploring — and here Macdonald paraphrases Heidegger — "'why there is being rather than nothing,' at the awe, wonder, and anxiety of this puzzle" whose "search is for meaning and a sense of unity and well being" (Macdonald, 1995, p. 179).

Macdonald's initiation of conversation on mytho-poetic curriculum and the mytho-poetic dimension of educational reality has, in the 21st century, blossomed into a rich constellation of considerations and case studies collected in two volumes: *Pedagogies of the Imagination: Mytho-poetic Curriculum in Theory and Practice* (Leonard & Willis, 2008) and *Spirituality, Mythopoesis and Learning* (Willis et al., 2009). Between the 30 texts that make up these volumes, it emerges that mytho-poetic education, defined and exemplified in diverse ways, names an approach to thematizing the dynamic interplay between self-understanding and openness to other, broader horizons of interpretation that happens through participational story-telling, story-reading, and story-making. Mytho-poetic education is seen as trans-formative rather than merely in-formative, exploratory rather

than explanatory, thematizing and continuing the story of one’s educational experience rather than concluding an educational analysis of one story.

Particularly noteworthy is Patricia Holland and Noreen Garman’s proposal that the mytho-poetic exceeds the confines of a third “category” or “method” or method as suggested by Macdonald, and instead refers to the broader horizon wherein teacher and student or writer and reader are drawn into a constant circle of being motivated to enact and reflect upon the plurality of interpretations and the meaningfulness of seeking to interpret ever anew. Hence, Holland and Garman (2008, pp. 17-18) put forth that “sensing a myth is a particular way of knowing,” as being confronted with a mythical story discloses and thematizes the tension between interpretive approaches, which always entails personal awareness, intuitive insight, ambiguity, and vision for self-reflection. Myths are particularly conducive to such transformative (self-)questioning by virtue of what Holland and Garman identify as the “reflexive,” “moral,” “controlling” (or “influencing”), and “evocative” “powers” of “mythic knowledge” and “poetic expression” (2008, pp. 18-22). Addressing a myth always goes hand-in-hand with being addressed by and called forth by myth, as the “potential effect” belongs neither to the text nor to the reader but to their concert (2008, p. 22). In this hermeneutic in-between, myth is not an object that can be conclusively taught, studied, and explained away, but a bringing-into-play: In mytho-poetic conditions, education becomes an imaginative, transformative journey, an open story of responding and reflecting, rather than a particular class assignment of reading and extracting some established meaning. An apt Gadamer-inspired wording of this experience of such a “concert of conditions” or “interplay” has been offered by Catherine Homan in *A Hermeneutics of Poetic Education: The Play of the In-Between*:

As oriented toward both what we are and what is beyond, poetry bears witness... Poetry, as the in-between, is fundamentally liminal in this traversing between past and future, self and other, imagined and realized, said and unsaid... By playing along in these dialogues, we become who we are through the conversation that we are (Homan, 2020, pp. 6, 7, 17).

Steven Hodge critically brings mytho-poetic curriculum back into dialogue with Heidegger. Hodge suggests that Heidegger’s later thinking on truth, poetry, art, and gods contains an implicit theory of mythopoesis which challenges some of the presumptions of recent mytho-poetic curricular theorizing and thereby promises a deeper phenomenology of mytho-poetic

education. In contrast to personalistic, psychologizing story-making, which potentially reinforces the modern subject-object division that Macdonald sought to overcome through the “mytho-poetic imagination,” or instead of, to paraphrastically quote one translation of Plato’s talk of *μῦθοι* in the Republic, just “any old stories” (Plato, 1997, 377b), Hodge redraws our attention to the “anti-subjectivist,” “anti-humanistic,” “anti-anthropocentric” thrust of Heidegger’s retrieval of the “pre-ontological” ground of myth and poetic revelation “beyond the consciousness of the poet” (Hodge, 2009, p. 61, 66). To the point, Hodge stresses that Heidegger takes us back anew to the divine topology of ancient myth and the poetic Muses, which brings into relief the finitude of purely human creativity in the face of the mystery of Being. Instead of “demythologizing” mythical and poetic wor(l)ds to fit personally familiar, modern, secular, scientific convictions, it is precisely the divine and sacred dimensions of ancient *μυθοποίησις* that rehabilitate us to the horizon of asking about our being in the world(s). Thus, posing the question of how Heidegger’s esoteric gods and mythopoetic revelations can “be of any practical value to educators” (Hodge, 2009, p. 61), Hodge sees the most practically employable and imaginatively powerful moment in Heidegger’s “fourfold” (*das Geviert*), the interplay of Sky, Earth, Divinities, and Mortals. By rediscovering our humble, inquiring role in the fourfold, Hodge suggests that Heidegger-inspired mytho-poetic education can “here and now and in little things” reopen the powerful, awe-inspiring ontological clearing in which myth and poetry speak to our being in a profoundly original, educational way — one that is denied in modern, positivist, technological and informational curriculum.

## Conclusion

With the founding father of Western philosophy and academic education, Plato, myth came to name a peculiar tension surrounding powerful, persuasive, moving, ostensibly “sacred” and “magical” stories which we tell ourselves and others — stories that are not of our own making, yet which concern ourselves in presenting our world, its beings, and beyond as being as they/we are, stories which are held or supposed to be primordial revelations, yet nevertheless seem to change and become anachronistic, stories whose deep and lofty realities are as if stranded and “scandalized” in the images and behaviors of our sensible world and the finitude of language stretched into the mystery of poetic ambiguity. In the “end,” Plato did not expel myth but thought with myth to think through the ideals and limits of philosophy and education. Anything else would have amounted to unprecedented

violence — against Greek tradition, against the “mythically-playful” masses of non-philosophers, against the existential fact that, between Sky, Earth, Divinities, and fellow Mortals,

A human being is always a teller of tales. We live surrounded by our stories and the stories of others, and from the very beginning of our existence, we learn to see everything in and around us through these stories... [In Ricoeur’s words,] ‘Our existence cannot be separated from the stories that we tell of ourselves.’... narration has its powerful cleansing potential in allowing things to show themselves as they are: In need of interpretation (Wierciński, 2019, pp. 234-235).

The hermeneutics of education as articulated by Wierciński in the wake of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur sheds new light on the promises and challenges of mytho-poetic education by centering learning and teaching around the facticity of (self-)understanding as the human mode of being-in-the-world (per Heidegger), as an event which transpires in confrontation with an other and demands interpretation (per Gadamer), and as identity formation to which access is mediated through constantly (re)authored and (re)read narratives (per Ricoeur). Like Heidegger’s invitation to enter the *μῦθος* of Plato’s Cave, the hermeneutics of education calls for “going through the story ourselves,” for experiencing and recognizing transformation instead of mere information. In this light, education as a “culture of questioning” poses the question of what happens to us and in us when we understand and interpret, recognizing and purposefully enacting the sense of wonder and astonishment at the challenge of finitely interpreting between seemingly infinite horizons. The confrontation with these horizons and wondering about and finding ourselves between them is significantly magnified in myths, as myths challenge us to interpret our place and story among worlds and beings in which “There is so much which is intangible, inexplicable, and elusive... which belongs to our experience of the world but does not belong to the realm of reason” (Wierciński, 2019, p. 14). As Plato recognized, the role of the “mythologist” is particularly crucial and sensitive: “Education as the culture of questioning follows the magic of a poetic vision. A hermeneutic teacher is a magician who, like a poet, creates the motions for the spell and is a storyteller. The teacher opens up access to reality, which otherwise would remain closed” (Wierciński, 2019, p. 14).

Returning to Plato’s Cave with Heidegger, the “motions for the spell” and the opening and closing of different happenings of the truth of our being (*Geschehen der Wahrheit des Seins*) are drawn out through the encouragement

to let ourselves be moved by myth so as to, over the course of going through the story, become accustomed to our being-in-the-world and the truth of the hermeneutic experience that Macdonald saw as the “reality of education” illuminated in mytho-poetic imagination. Heidegger tells us that myth is an “appeal in which Being itself dispenses itself to man and therewith first indicates the paths a seeking might take” (Heidegger, 1992, pp. 128). In turn, Gadamer tells us that myth, like art, is how it is “because in what it says it is equally unfolding things and at the same time holding them back in readiness. The assertion it makes will speak over and over again” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 212). This primordial “directive” and “appeal” which “indicates the paths a seeking might take,” this “unfolding and holding back” and “speaking over and over again,” is the mytho-poetic story of education that we ourselves are and must ever learn to tell as the beginning and happening of a lengthy affair.

**References:**

- Arnold, Jafe. (2022). “The Eternal (Re)Turn: Heidegger and the ‘*Absolutes Getragensein*’ of Myth.” *Phainomena: Journal of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics* 31: 120/121: 93-119.
- Brisson, Luc. (1998). *Plato the Myth Maker*. Translated by Gerard Naddaf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brisson, Luc. (2004). *How Philosophers Saved Myths: Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology*. Translated by Catherine Tihanyi. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Collobert, Catherine, Pierre Destree, and Francisco J. Gonzalez (eds.). (2012). *Plato and Myth: Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths*. Leiden: Brill.
- Ehrmantraut, Michael. (2010). *Heidegger’s Philosophic Pedagogy*. London: Continuum.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. (2007). *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*. Translated and edited by Richard E. Palmer. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. (2020). *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London: Bloomsbury.
- Heidegger, Martin. (2010). *Being and Truth*. Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. (2013). *The Essence of Truth: On Plato’s Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*. Translated by Ted Sadler. London: Bloomsbury Academic.



- Heidegger, Martin. (1997). *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Translated by Richard Taft. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. (1992). *Parmenides*. Translated by André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. (1998). “*Plato’s Doctrine of Truth*”. Translated by Thomas Sheehan. In: Heidegger, Martin, *Pathmarks*. Edited by William McNeill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. (1972). *On Time and Being*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
- Homan, Catherine. (2020). *A Hermeneutics of Poetic Education: The Play of the In-Between*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Leonard, Timothy and Peter Willis (eds.). (2008). *Pedagogies of the Imagination: Mythopoetic Curriculum in Educational Practice*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Macdonald, James B. (1995). *Theory as a Prayerful Act*. Edited by Bradley J. Macdonald. New York: Peter Lang.
- Maurice, Lisa (ed.). (2021). *Our Mythical Education: The Reception of Classical Myth Worldwide in Formal Education, 1900-2020*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- Morgan, Kathryn A. (2004). *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Murray, Penelope. (1999). “What Is a *Muthos* for Plato?”. In: Buxton, Richard (ed.), *From Myth to Reason? Studies in the Development of Greek Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 251-262.
- Palmer, Richard E (1969). *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Plato. (1997). *Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper, multiple translators. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Plato. (1902). *The Republic of Plato*. (1902). Translated by James Adam. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Plato. (2004). *Selected Myths*. Edited by Catalin Partenie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schalow, Frank (ed.). (2020). *Historical Dictionary of Heidegger’s Philosophy*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Thomson, Iain. (2002). “Heidegger on Ontological Education, or How We Become What We Are.” In: Peters, Michael (ed.). *Heidegger, Education, and Modernity*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

- Tofighian, Omid. (2016). *Myth and Philosophy in Platonic Dialogues*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wierciński, Andrzej. (2019). *Hermeneutics of Education: Exploring and Experiencing the Unpredictability of Education*. Zürich: LIT Verlag.
- Willis, Peter, Timothy Leonard, Anne Morrison, and Steven Hodge (eds). (2009). *Spirituality, Mythopoesis and Learning*. Mt Gravatt: Post Pressed.