Remarks on Christopher Gill's „Plato's Atlantis Story and the Birth of Fiction"

Philipp Kneis · Seminar Handout · Nov 29, 2000

1. Quotations

Fiction

"For a fictional narrative in the past tense is **not formally distinguishable** from a narrative of past factual events; and it is only **certain conventional and extrinsic signals** (like the title of a book) which denote the class of the narrative. Moreover, an **audience** follows a fictional narrative with much the same kind of mental attention and **emotional involvement** as it does a factual narrative: fictional events may seem, in a sense, as **real** as, or more real than, factual events. Yet, at some level, the audience is aware that the fictional events are not real in the ordinary sense of the word but invented by the author; this awareness underlies and characterizes the kind of attention, and involvement, elicited by fictional narrative. **Fiction, one may say, is a kind of game, in which both participants share in a willed pretense, treating what is unreal as real, and what is invented as actual. The rules of the game** of fiction are not intuitively obvious, but **presuppose a degree of cultural sophistication** in a society or individual; in particular, the capacity **to draw a clear distinction between fact and fiction.**" [Gill. "Fiction" 64f, my emphasis (here and following)]

"Plato's first large-scale discussion of literature comes early in the *Republic*. The subject is the **role of literature in education**, [...] He begins with the challenging claim: 'The class of narratives (*muthoi*) is, as a whole, false, though it contains some truths" (377a). This sounds, excitingly, as though Plato is announcing the **fictional nature of imaginative narrative**, while **conceding it a capacity for, perhaps deeper-level, truth**." [Gill. "Fiction" 65f – cf. Plato's criticism of the Homerian depiction of gods]

"In fact, I think Plato deliberately frames his story in such a way as to invite readers to play the (still unfamiliar) game of fiction, **to share in the willing and conscious acceptance of the false as true**." [Gill. "Fiction" 65]

Author

"**Hérodote**, qui pourtant s'intéressait beaucoup à ce que les Égyptiens pouvaient apprendre aux Grecs sur leur passé, **ne connaissait apparemment rien de cette histoire**, non plus que Thucydide ni Hellanicos de Lesbos. **Isocrate**, qui pourtant ne manquait pas une occasion de chanter les hauts faits d'Athènes à l'époque mystique, **semble tout en ignorer lui aussi**. On oublie aussi que **Platon lui-même n'est venu à en parler que tout à fin de sa vie**, le Timée et le Critias étant des œuvres tardives que le philosophe a composées peu d'années avant sa mort souvenue en 348/7." [Giovannini 152 – Plato is no historiographer]

"In the Atlantis story, Plato is, one may say, **playing the game of being a historian; and the fact that it is a game is signalled by the overt claim to historical truth in a context in which we are not disposed to accept the claim**." [Gill. "Fiction" 75]

Fact/Fiction

"In a brief but important aside, Plato makes it plain that he does not believe there can be any factually accurate account of the distant past. [..] Therefore, all *mythoi* about the distant past [..] are, on the literal level, 'false'; they are not the factual accounts they seem to be. However, **this is not the falsity of which Plato, primarily, complains**. [..] Our narratives approximate to truth and falsehood insofar as we give a more or less accurate **representation of the entities about which we construct our narratives**." [Gill. "Fiction" 66]

Writer

"He explicitly withdraws from the writer the capacity he earlier granted him, of basing his 'imitation' on an intellectual grasp of the being he imitates [..] but his second description has distinct advantages, notably in isolating the fictional qualities of the writer. [..] It describes him as a **maker of images, which** in two senses, 'are not' (596-8), but **are not, for that reason, true or false** in the way factual statements about reality must be." [Gill. "Fiction" 68f]

Premise

"Thus, at the start of the *Timaeus*, Socrates summarizes the institutions of the ideal state delineated in the *Republic*, and says he would like to hear a story which would bring out the character of his state, by representing it in a major war (19b-d). **This prepares us for an invented fable, the narrative presentation of a philosophical theme.** Surprisingly, however, Critias proposes to satisfy Socrates' request with what he claims is a historical report of a factual event." [Gill. "Fiction" 71]

"At the start of the *Critias*, Critias seems preoccupied, not with the problem of recalling accurately the details of his account [..] but with the problem of **giving his narrative the illusory realism** which he says audiences require (107). **This concern seems more appropriate to a story-teller than a historian**" [Gill. "Fiction" 72]

"These sustained echoes of the *Republic* naturally lead us to the following conclusions. Plato seems to be indicating that **he is about to experiment with the kind of consciously invented narrative that he envisages** [..] **in the *Republic*** (382c-d, 389b). This narrative **will be a representation of a morally good subject by an author who knows the real nature of his subject** [..]. This narrative will be **'true' to its good subject, and hence 'useful,'** morally educative, for its audience, **even if, judged by factual standards, this story will be a 'falsehood'** [..]**. But the falsehood is not intended to deceive:** for, by his introduction, with its allusions to his earlier discussions, Plato indicates, **from the start**, that his story is an **invention**. [Gill. "Fiction" 73]

Motivation

"Plato is motivated by the **social and political concerns** which underlie his whole *Republic* and not by a disinterested desire to analyze contemporary literary practice." [Gill. "Fiction" 67]

"What concerns him is **whether he can give his story the kind of surface realism that narrators of human action are expected to provide**." [Gill. "Fiction" 67 – therefore probably the long and detailed descriptions]

"These details may all have relevance to Plato's underlying themes; **but their significance is by no means on the surface.** In the final paragraph of the work, by contrast, Plato – it seems, rather hastily – **reminds us of the moral skeleton of his story** (the conflict between the just and the unjust state), by outlining the moral corruption and inchoate punishment of Atlantis. In the divergent tones of these two sections we may, perjaps, see **Plato's two-fold literary motives** at work (**the philosophico-moral** and **the more purely fictional**). It is possible that an unreconcilable tension between them explains why Plato breaks off his story in mid-sentence immediately after the moralizing paragraph. **Yet the two motives need not have seemed irreconcilable** when Plato conceived his story. Indeed, the attempt to combine them, to create a philosophical fable which was more realistic than any of his previous myths, which went further towards creating its own phantasm-world (like the literature Plato analyzed in the *Republic*), may have been the guiding conception behind the work, and one adumbrated in its two introductions. [Gill. "Fiction" 74]

Genre

"The overall impression of these allusions is not that Plato's narrative is actual historiography but rather a **pastiche of historiography, almost a parody** (since the claims to exact authenticity are combined with an implausibly vast time-scale). The historiographical style is oddly blended with an almost epic use of gods as agents in human affairs (notably, as patrons and punishers of cities). [..] The more one reads Critias' summary of his story, the more it seems **not the unique factual document it purports to be, but an elaborate literary collage** – Plato's own reworking of the theme of war, with **significant allusions** to previous treatments of the theme in the histories of Herodotus and Thukydides (with Homer's *Iliad* and Hesiod's *Theogony* in the background)." [Gill. "Fiction" 75]

"I think [..] that, in essence, the story was intended to be a politico-philosophical myth constructed out of historical ingredients, and specifically designed as a cautionary tale – and possibly a protreptic – for an Athenian audience. [..] As we read the account of Atlantis, with its fantastic and uniquely detailed picture of a fictional reality, we can easily believe that Plato is **momentarily infatuated** with the world he is creating. The political significance of the picture us by no means on the surface; and, while I have suggested reasons why this restraint, in itself, served those political purposes, it is still remarkable – in a Platonic text – just how unsymbolic the picture superficially seems." [Gill. "Genre" 299]

"The reader may, in fact, be deceived; but what Plato wants is a **willed self-deception**, a chosen suspension of incredulity for the duration of the story. **The game of fiction was not a familiar one in Plato's day**, as it is to us. [..] One might suppose that Plato was, in fact, exploring this element in fiction by means of this element in obtaining the reader's complicity. This **new element of intended complicity in the fictional game** makes his work the **first piece of deliberately fictional narrative in Greek literature**." [Gill. "Fiction" 76]

2. Remarks

- Plato's Atlantis narrative may be formally designed as historiography, yet this constitutes only the more obvious layer. Plato is no historiographer; his topics concern the ethical and political realm. The far too obvious borrowing from ancient historiographers, the seemingly forced narration of how the story was obtained, the fact that he appears to be the only one knowing this story – and he's telling it just now in the context of the Timaios and Kritias dialogs – all these are signs that the text should not be understood as conventional historiography.
- Are these signs overlooked, it is easily possible to understand the text as a narration of facts – and Plato not only allows for this approach, he assists it by detailed descriptions of various details. He lets fiction become alive beyond the scope of the parable.
- Plato chooses for his narration such *topoi* which are present in the consciousness and memory of his readers – since his text is designed for a specific audience, that of his contemporary Athens. The fall of Atlantis appears possible after the catastrophe of Helike, the fight of Athens against an overwhelming, despotic major power is not unknown either and invokes memories of Marathon etc.
- In the beginning of the *Timaios* the text refers to a similar dialogical situation like that of the *Politeia*, and Socrates demands for a case study to demonstrate an ideal state. Examples are always best when real; if that is not possible, the fiction should contain as many realistic elements as possible. Furthermore, the temporal (or spatial, or both) distance to reality should be maximized, best by shifting the narration into the far past or future or to impossibly far removed regions.

- Even if it may appear surprising that Plato utilizes a more directly fictitious form for his narrative, it needs be referred to his use of fictional elements in his regular use of real historical figures as dialog partners which are pulled out of their "natural context". The speakers may be based upon historical persons – and thus evoke certain stereotypes – but they are used rather eclectically, the dialogical situation as such is fictitious, only the topics are "real".
- Gill justly declares Plato's Atlantis story as the "Birth of Fiction", as the moralizing aspect moves into the background relative to the narrative. In the reception of the story, many of Plato's allusions to Greek *topoi* could probably not any more be understood properly – thus it was possible for a medieval and modern audience that the fiction became reality. This may not have been Plato's original intent, yet it confirms his faculties as a writer of literature more decidedly than anything else.

3. Works Cited

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Plato, *Timaios* and *Kritias* dialogs

