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CICERO'S SOMNIUM SCIPIONIS/ THE DREAM OF SCIPIO, OR THE METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATION OF HARMONY AS A GOVERNING PRINCIPLE

Ion Cordoneanu (a)*

(a) Associate Professor, Ph.D., Dunarea de Jos University from Galati, Romania,

E-mail: theosisro@yahoo.com

Abstract

Harmony is one of the concepts that permeate the history of human creation in varied fields: philosophy, arts, music, science, economics, politics, etc. It is a preoccupation of the Pythagorean, of Plato and Aristotle, and a governing principle theorised during the times of the Byzantine Empire. However, in Cicero's political thinking, harmony is the foundation stone of the organisation and functioning of the republic as body politic, a political principle which reflects the principle of the entire universe. *Somnium Scipionis* (The Dream of Scipio), an allegory on the harmony of the universe, is the closing part of the treatise *De re publica*, by which Cicero, inspired by Plato and synthesizing stoic, epicurean and neoplatonic ideas, bestows his political testament upon world culture and advocates the cultivation of virtue.

Keywords: harmony-concordia; the dream of Scipio; virtue; reason;

1. INTRODUCTION

Montesquieu, the eighteenth-century moralist of reason, regarded balance as a primary given of all things, and, in *De l'esprit des lois* (1748), like a commenter who sees in nature, society, art, and politics a single law of competition which subsumes the notions of fight and conjunction towards the same goal, illustrated this topic by situating himself in the area of political acts. He considered that what we regard as union in a body politic is highly equivocal: the true union is that harmony by which all parties, as opposing to one another as they may appear to us, concur towards the general wellbeing of the society. It is possible that harmony is present in a state precisely when we see just disorder; i.e. a harmony from which happiness ensues, which is the only genuine peace. Things happen as they do with the parts of our universe, bonded for eternity by one's action and the other's reaction. The image is completely Ciceronian – the destiny of the Roman politician and philosopher had reached, in the 18th century, in the Age of Enlightenment, its climactic authority and prestige in the works of John Locke, Edmund Burke or Montesquieu.



Following in the steps of the Greek philosophers, Cicero naturalizes the dominant ideas of their political thinking in Rome. Nevertheless, “the difference is indeed significant between the fifth-century BC Greek poleis and the Roman Republic that stands at the head of a world Imperium. When one moves from polis to the cosmopolitanism of an empire, politics and ethics no longer play the same role” (Jean-Claude Eslin, *Dieu et le pouvoir*, re-transl. from the Romanian version, *Dumnezeu și Puterea*, 2001, pp. 35-36).

Cicero is important for the political meditation of his followers because of his theory on the origin of the state, exercising justice, and the character of law. The Roman philosopher argues that politics is possible only under the condition that it is admitted that the origin and becoming of human societies are not determined by hazard but they are results of a global project, of a “right reason” (Stoicism) attributed to divinity (Eslin, 39). This right reason determines the occurrence of the seeds of universal or natural law – an argument by virtue of which Cicero claims that human virtues and the state are not founded on convention (*De re publica*, I, 41). True law, which is in agreement to nature, is the unchanging and everlasting right reason of universal application. It is “one and eternal and unchangeable law valid for all nations and all times; it is one God, over us all, for He is the author of this law, its promulgator, and its enforcing judge” (*De re publica*, III, 33). The shared character of reason and universal aspiration to justice are the foundations of the universal society to which every individual belongs. For Cicero, the supreme reason is the law that is inscribed in human nature. Since reason is shared by man and God alike, it creates the primordial model of society between the two.

2. THE PLATONIC MYTHOS

In his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, Macrobius pursues the analysis of Cicero’s text by repeatedly referring to Plato. Attempting to figure “the reason for including such a fiction and dream in books dealing with governmental problems, and the justification for introducing a description of celestial circles, orbits and spheres, the movement of planets and the revolutions of the heavens into a discussion of the regulations governing commonwealths” (p. 81), Macrobius resorts to Plato, according to whom the myth is not opposed to logos but represents a condensation of a methodical procedure ensuing from the logic of reason (Cornea, “Interpretare la Republica”, in Platon, *Opere*. vol. V, 1986, p. 53)

Cicero’s commentator identifies in the platonic works a construction in favour of the idea that “men of surpassing wisdom, whose habit it was to regard the search for truth as nothing if not divine, have padded their treatises, nowhere else prolix, with something superfluous. A brief explanation to this point must be made, therefore, so that the reader may clearly comprehend what follows” (Macrobius, p. 81). Macrobius asserts that Cicero’s choice of closing his treatise with a dream narrative is inspired from the platonic vision over the instauration of the state. For Plato, the state, as any other community or family, can only exist as long as the love for justice is instituted in souls. But for this it is necessary that people believe that the reward for this virtue will extend to the afterlife, as the soul is eternal and, after being freed from the bodies, the souls “have definite places allotted them according to their deserts” (Macrobius 82). Macrobius refers to the platonic dialogues *Phaedo* and *Georgias* to support his theory on the condition of the soul after leaving the body, and notes that this topic is preponderantly tackled in those dialogues on the matter of instituting the state. Macrobius’ construction in favour of the demonstration that men’s souls await rewards for practicing justice ends with a reference to Er’s myth (*The Republic*, 614a-621d), which is considered a fairy tale: “After he has given chief place to justice and has taught us that the soul does not perish at death, Plato points out by means of a closing fable – for that is what many call it – whither the soul goes on leaving the body and whence it comes to the body” (Macrobius, p. 82).

What is a myth – what is a fairy-tale? How can one construe Plato’s ‘myths’? We note that Macrobius employs the term ‘fable’. Are Plato’s myths simple fairy tales or have they, aside their role as literary tools, a different function in the platonic discursivity? According to some commenters, Plato’s myths, albeit famous, have been overestimated. Thomas Alexander Szlezák considers that, since it opposes the λόγος, the myth is no longer in opposition with it in some cases (Protagoras). Theuth’s myth on the invention of writing (*Phaedrus*, 274c-275b) displays, according to Szlezák, the features of a myth: “it is set in the distant past, the characters are deities that enter the action through their speeches, and the object of the narrative is a divine prehistoric ‘fabrication’, that is, setting the essential characteristics of

one thing as valid for all times" (p. 147). For Phaedrus, however, this 'history' remains only a fabrication of a presupposed λόγος.

The platonic myth has psychological power, and the mythical narrative complements the conceptual analysis, even though the myth is "a secondary means of accessing reality" (Szelezák, p. 150).

In Plato's times, the desacralization of the myth reaches its peak, and what used to represent for the archaic man a true history that "narrates a sacred event, a primordial event that took place in the beginning of Time, *ab initio*" (Eliade, *Sacral și profanul*, Humanitas, 2000, p. 73), becomes fiction or fable, which, in order to survive, submits to the racks of allegorical interpretation (Cristian Bădiliță, *Miturile lui Platon*, Humanitas, 1996, p. 6).

Nevertheless, in platonic key, the mythical analogy has a methodological function, since reality as a whole is a hierarchic overlapping of planes that reflect one another, and since the philosopher is like a demiurge who creates in the pursuit of this reality when he concocts myths, formulates analogies and resorts to images and metaphors (Cornea in Platon p. 53).

3. WHAT KIND OF DREAM IS THE DREAM OF SCIPIO?

Cicero underlies divination both with historical arguments, its founder being Romulus himself, and with arguments pertaining to stoic philosophy, which claim that the soul is of a divine essence, as part of the universal soul from where it embodies and to which it returns after the death of the body; the divine essence of the human soul makes possible, according to stoics, its communication with the divinity, explains its prophetic abilities. Cicero believes that "the soul can reach the exaltation proper to divination, with the intervention of the reason or science, but by their own impulse, released from and unencumbered by the body, in two ways: in a state of prophetic delirium and in the state of dreaming (Cicero, 1998, 43)

The ancient believed that the delirium and the sleep are the two forms of prophetic and, respectively, oneiric divination. The concern with divination, especially with the divination through dreams, occupies an important role during the Antiquity, as there are many classifications of dreams. The most commonly known one belongs to Antiphon (the end of the fifth century BC) and to the Egyptian physician Herophilos, a contemporary of Ptolemy Soter, according to whom dreams fall under three categories: 1. dreams sent by the gods; 2. dreams that are born within the soul itself and which are attributed a prophetic value by Aristotle himself; 3. mixed dreams, determined by an external preoccupation of the soul, as there are, for instance, the erotic dreams (Artemidoros, 11). In what completeness is concerned, Freud states that the ancients' belief that the dream is a message sent by gods to influence men's actions was a complete dream theory, providing information on everything that was worth of being known about the dream (Freud, 109).

In his attempt to establish the nature and significance of the dream of Scipio, Macrobius makes use of his own classification of dreams. In keeping with Plato's views, the Latin commentator does not disregard the fact that, methodologically speaking, some delimitations are in order, and eventually concludes: "the treatises of Plato and Cicero suffer no harm from Er's testimony and Scipio's dream; and the treatment of sacred subjects is accomplished without loss of dignity, by using their names" (Macrobius, 85)

Macrobius categorises the dreams in five main types: the enigmatic dream (*oneiros/ somnium*), the prophetic vision (*horama/visio*), the oracular dream (*chrematicos/ oraculum*), the nightmare (*enypnion/ insomnium*) and the apparition (*phantasma/ visum*). The last two have no prophetic significance, which determines Macrobius to eliminate them, following a brief analysis, as they "are of no assistance in foretelling the future, but by means of the other three, we are gifted with the powers of divination" (Macrobius 89-90). According to the definitions of the first three categories (enigmatic, prophetic and oracular) and after the identification of the five subcategories of the enigmatic dream (personal, social, alien, public and universal), Macrobius claims that "the dream which Scipio reports embraces the three reliable types mentioned above, and also has to do with all five varieties of the enigmatic dream" (Macrobius, 90).

Consequently, the dream of Scipio is:

1. oracular, because the two people who reveal the future to him are his relatives;
2. a prophetic vision, because Scipio saw the realms in which he dwell after his death and his condition;

3. an enigmatic dream, because 3.1. it is personal (Scipio is led to the higher realms and made aware of the future); 3.2. it is alien (he sees the condition and fate of the souls of others); 3.3. it is social (Scipio finds out that similar realms are made ready for people with merits similar to his own); 3.4. it is public (foresees the victory of Rome, the destruction of Carthage, the triumph on the Capitol and the civil conflict); and 3.5. it is universal (it was initiated either by looking up or down to the wonders of the sky, the celestial circles and the harmony of the spheres, unknown until then to men alive; in addition, he was a witness to the revolution of the stars and planets and was able to survey the entire Earth) (Macrobius, 92).

4. HARMONY, ETHICAL-POLITICAL VISION AND WELTANSCHAUUNG

Harmony/*Concordia* is a significant concept of Cicero's political views. There are three possible interpretations of the term: The first is the longstanding conventional Roman republican idea of *concordia* as unity, friendship, and agreement. The second is what Cicero called the *concordia ordinum*, an innovative idea of *concordia* as a coalition of the two Roman orders of the Senate and equites. The third is the idea of *concordia* as a *consensus omnium bonorum* what Cicero called *concordia civium* or *concordia civitatis*. This idea represents an important shift in the thinking of the Roman orator who began to see the survival of the republic as depending on a consensus that went beyond the coalition of the Senate and equites. These three understandings of harmony are subsumed to Cicero's aim at thinking an image of the world as organized and dominated by the stoic principle of universal order ruled by the natural law in which the right reason is reified. The manifestation of the right reason in the natural order is reflected in the allegory of Scipio's dream in the form of a universe whose principle is the model of the organisation of human existence.

In truth, Macrobius himself infers Cicero's project and understands that the purpose of the dream (*skopos*) is that of teaching us that "the souls of those who serve the state well are returned to the heavens after death and there enjoy everlasting blessedness" (Macrobius, 92). However, Cicero's plea for political harmony is founded on ethics. In *Tusculanae Disputationes*, Cicero defines virtue as "the disposition of the soul to live in accord and consistently with itself, making those who possess it praiseworthy (...) being meritorious in itself, by virtue emerge the morally beautiful intentions, thoughts and actions and the right reason in general" (*Tusculanae*, 4, 15. In Cicero, 1973, 37). Cicero is concerned with identifying Latin equivalences for the established Greek terminology: the word *sophrosyne*, for example, utilized by both Plato and Aristotle, is termed *temperantia*, *moderatio*, and sometimes modesty. For him, restraint is the means by which one acquires balance and harmony. His ethic model will inspire him in his advocating for harmony among powers within the political realm.

In truth, the dream of Scipio, a testament of a universal consciousness, reflects an image of the world in which cosmology and ethics turn into ontological tools – the universal principle, the reason, order the whole, from the heavenly spheres to the life of men and the foundation of the state – a genuine *Weltanschauung* rebuilt on the foundations of the symbol theory in which one cannot disregard the metaphysical referent (Borella, 2004; Borella, 1990, 1995).

In this way, Jean Borella reconsiders the symbol theory, which states that the semantic triangle has the following synthetic description: 1. the signifier (symbolizer) – customarily of a sensible nature; 2. the meaning – of mental nature, identified with the idea that the signifier evokes in our thoughts, either naturally or culturally; 3. the signified – the non-visible object that the symbol can denote. The designation of the signified or the complete fulfilment of the meaning is the toil of the hermeneutist. To this triangle, Borella adds the metaphysical signified, the archetype, the meta-cosmic principle. In relation to this latter component, the signifier, the meaning and the particular signified are just its distinct manifestations.

Scipio's dream, interpreted within the framework of this paradigm, can be deciphered as follows: 1. the signifier – the dream itself. At the level of consciousness (or, one may say, of the Ciceronian imaginary), the dream itself is that which signifies, being of "material" nature and bearing meaning. 2. the meaning – the dream is manifest as a vehicle bearing an oracular, prophetic, and enigmatic revelation; 3. the signified is of an ethical nature (the fate of those who serve their country based on virtue) and of a cosmological nature (the harmony and order of the spherically-organised universe); 4. the metaphysical signified – the right reason as a universal principle.

5. A POSSIBLE CULTURAL CODA: DANTE'S 'INJUSTICE'

Cicero may be considered a universal man, *homo universalis*. He exerted the most profound influence on Latin literature, and his ideas "have fertilized the European culture from the Antiquity to the present day" (Traian Diaconescu, "Preface" to Cicero, 2014, 9).

However, in his world literature masterpiece and mirror of the mediaeval imaginary, *The Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri places Cicero in the first circle of hell, in Limbo, next to the souls of other virtuous men who lived before Christ:

Here, as mine ear could note, no plaint was heard
Except of sighs, that made th' eternal air
Tremble, not caus'd by tortures, but from grief
Felt by those multitudes, many and vast,
Of men, women, and infants. Then to me
The gentle guide: "Inquir'st thou not what spirits
Are these, which thou beholdest? Ere thou pass
Farther, I would thou know, that these of sin
Were blameless; and if aught they merited,
It profits not, since baptism was not theirs,
The portal to thy faith. If they before
The Gospel liv'd, they serv'd not God aright;
And among such am I. For these defects,
And for no other evil, we are lost;
"Only so far afflicted, that we live
Desiring without hope." (Dante, *Inferno*, Canto IV, 25-42).

Cicero's placement in *Inferno* is consistent with the Christian doctrine, dominant during the Middle Ages. Notwithstanding, Dante can but admit the contribution to the treasury of mankind of those who finds there. It is not just a simple allowance made to the Antiquity, as Plato and Socrates, Diogenes, Anaxagoras, Thales, Empedocles, Heraclitus, or Cicero and Seneca are the ones who

There on the green enamel of the plain
Were shown me the great spirits, by whose sight
I am exalted in my own esteem. (Canto IV, 118-120)

6. CONCLUSION

After Dante's death, his contemporaries noted that the last cantos of *Paradise* were missing. Still, it is said that, in a dream, Dante showed a relative where he hid these cantos, considered essential for *The Divine Comedy* – also a divinatory creation – to be complete and, moreover, for having a complete image of the way in which Dante's world 'really' looked like (Patapievici, 2004). Conversely, in the Middle Ages, Cicero's treatise *De re publica* was lost, but *The Dream of Scipio*, a text that was concluding the treatise, was preserved and became a work that carried through centuries the image of the world of one of greatest spirits of the Antiquity.

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