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Myth and Imagination in Olympiodorus’ Commentary on Aristotle’s *Meteorology*

Chiara Militello

That myth plays a crucial role in Olympiodorus’ thought—possibly even more than in other fellow late Neoplatonists—has become clearer and clearer in recent years.¹ Harold Tarrant has highlighted how Olympiodorus’ distinction between poetic and philosophical myths allows him to give a special status to the stories told in Plato’s dialogues.² Michael Griffin has shown that Olympiodorus’ attitude towards myths sheds light on his relationship with Christianity and on his general exegetical principles.³ Finally, François Renaud has made a case for considering some of Olympiodorus’ statements as forms of esoteric communication, which can only be really understood by applying the same kind of interpretation Olympiodorus uses for myths.⁴ As one can see, scholars have recently become aware that the study of Olympiodorus’ interpretation of myths is crucial to the understanding of some of the main features of his teaching: his interpretation of Plato’s dialogues, his relationship with Christians, his way to express his own thought.

So far, the research on this topic has focused on Olympiodorus’ commentaries on Plato’s dialogues, but in the commentary on Aristotle’s *Meteorology* there are several notes on myth that not only allow us to better understand Olympiodorus’ take elsewhere, but also present ideas that are unique to this work.⁵ Some of these statements contribute to a more complete image of the philosopher’s view on Platonic myths. In fact, in lecture 21, Olympiodorus gives a thorough explanation of the relationship between Plato’s rational proofs of the

¹ I have been able to write this paper thanks to University of Catania funding the project *CommAris. La filosofia come esegesi in età imperiale e tardo-antica: i commentatori aristotelici* (PIA no di inCentivi per la Ricerca di Ateneo 2020/2022 - Linea di Intervento 3 “Starting Grant”).

² Olympiodorus (1998) 48-50.

³ Olympiodorus (2015) 3-6.

⁴ Renaud (2021).

⁵ On Olympiodorus’ commentary on *Meteorology*, see Viano (2006) and Baksa (2013).

immortality of the soul and the three different mythical accounts of the underworld that can be found respectively in the *Gorgias*, in the *Phaedo*, and in the *Republic*.⁶ Even more interestingly, in lecture 24 Olympiodorus refers to the link between myth and the faculty of imagination, a link that plays an important role in the explanation of the significance of myths in lecture 46 of *On Gorgias*. Indeed, the passages of *On Gorgias* are better understood in the light of the statements of *On Meteorology*, where Olympiodorus highlights the similarities between imagination, which gives shape and form to what is shapeless and formless, and myth, which gives a body to the incorporeals.⁷

In the commentary on *Meteorology* one does not find just statements touching topics also treated elsewhere, though. In some passages Olympiodorus, inspired by the subject of the treatise he is commenting on, focuses on the relationship between myth and natural philosophy—something he does not dwell on in his commentaries on Plato. In lecture 10, Olympiodorus shows how the Pythagoreans used a myth (Phaeton driving the chariot of the sun) to explain the existence of a natural entity (the Milky Way),⁸ and at the same time he explains why Aristotle, as a natural philosopher, could ignore such an explanation, deeming it unworthy of even a refutation.⁹ Indeed, Olympiodorus stresses how Aristotle treats mythical reports as unreliable (lecture 16).¹⁰ Generally, the commentator distinguishes mythical and philosophical explanations (lecture 24),¹¹ and contrasts the attitude of the narrators of poetic myths to the approach of the philosophers, arguing that the only the former can conceive the end of the universe, an idea that, Olympiodorus advises his students, budding philosophers should not entertain (lecture 18).¹² Even though philosophical myths do not have such dangerous literal meanings, they should be treated as different from plain philosophy nonetheless: this is the objection Olympiodorus raises to Aristotle, when the latter interprets Plato's description of the Tartarus in the *Phaedo* as a physical account rather than as a myth (lecture 21).¹³

⁶ Olymp. *in Mete.* 144,14–145,4 (ed. Stüve).

⁷ See below.

⁸ Olymp. *in Mete.* 66,27–67,20. See Baksa (2013) 28; 55–56.

⁹ Olymp. *in Mete.* 67,20–23; 70,3–4; 70,15–16.

¹⁰ Ibid. 108,29–31.

¹¹ Ibid. 164,24.

¹² Ibid. 118,26–119,2.

¹³ Ibid. 144,11–14.

In this paper, I will focus on one of the passages I have mentioned—the one about the relationship between myth and imagination. This passage is part of Olympiodorus' comment of Aristotle's discussion of the cause of the saltiness of the sea in *Meteorology* 2.3. In order to understand this discussion, it may be useful to give a brief summary of the topics discussed by Aristotle when he studies the sea in the first three chapters of the second book of *Meteorology*, together with an outline of Olympiodorus' comment on these chapters. In 2.1, Aristotle announces that he wants to discuss the nature of the sea, its origin and its saltiness. He reports the views of the theologians, according to which the sea has sources, and of the natural philosophers; the latter stated that the sea is drying up, that it is the sweat of the earth, and that it is salty because earth is mixed with its water. Then, Aristotle proceeds to refute the theologians, i.e., to prove that the sea does not have sources. In lecture 19, Olympiodorus interprets this whole discussion as being about the question whether the saltiness of the sea was generated. In 2.2, Aristotle refutes another thesis that previous philosophers held, i.e., that it was the main body of water; within this refutation, he explains evaporation. Then, Aristotle criticizes Plato's theory that the water we see on the surface of the Earth comes from a body of water within the Earth. In lecture 20, Olympiodorus argues that Aristotle agrees with the thesis that the sea is the main body of water. In lecture 21, the commentator explains that Plato's theory should be interpreted as a myth, not as a physical account. In 2.3, Aristotle gives his opinion about the origin and saltiness of the sea. According to him, the sea is eternal, and the cause of the saltiness of the sea is the dry exhalation present in rain; contextually to the proofs of these theses, Aristotle refutes the opinions he had cited in 2.1. Olympiodorus comments on Aristotle's discussion of the idea that the sea is drying up in lecture 21, and on Aristotle's account of the cause of saltiness in lectures 22 to 24.

As I have mentioned, according to Aristotle, the sea is salty because its water is mixed with an earthy substance, namely the smoky exhalation. In order to confirm this thesis, the philosopher mentions the case of the Dead Sea, which Aristotle refers to as "a lake in Palestine".

Arist. *Mete.* 2.359a,16–22 (ed. Fobes)

If there were any truth in the stories they tell about the lake in Palestine it would further bear out what I say. For they say if you bind a man or beast and throw him into it he floats and does not sink beneath the surface; and that the lake is to bitter and salty that

there are no fish in it, and that if you wet clothes in it and shake them out it cleans them.¹⁴ (tr. Lee)

On one hand, the water of the Dead Sea is particularly thick, as is shown by the fact that it can support the body of an animal with its limbs tied up. In the preceding lines, Aristotle has argued that water becomes thicker when something is added to it, giving the examples of eggs put in water and of mud. Eggs sink in fresh water, but if one adds enough salt to the water, they float; this shows that the addition has made the water thicker, so thick that it can bear the weight of the eggs. Similarly, if you add a great amount of earth to water, it becomes mud, which is obviously thicker than water.¹⁵ As the water of the Dead Sea is particularly thick and the thickness of water is due to the presence of some substance, the reader is left to conclude that in the Dead Sea, water is mixed with a great amount of another substance. But—adds Aristotle—the water of this lake is also particularly salty, as one can see from the fact that no fish can survive in it, and that it is possible to clean clothes by soaking them in it. For Aristotle, this confirms that the more substance you add to water, the more it gets salty, and generally, that saltiness is due to the admixture of something to the water.

Aristotle introduces all these features of the Dead Sea as reports whose truth he cannot confirm. He says (1) that “some tell” (μυθολογοῦσί τινες) that there is a lake whose water is so thick it can support a big weight and (2) that “they say” (λέγουσι) that the water of this lake is so salty that it is good for washing clothes but not for supporting animal life. Of course, in the context of this paper, the most important phrase is μυθολογοῦσί τινες. Generally, Aristotle uses μυθολογεῖν to mean two different acts: making a statement that is false—or, at least, that does not have a clear truth state—about a natural phenomenon and telling tales about the traditional gods.¹⁶ Here, μυθολογεῖν obviously has the former meaning. Usually, Aristotle mentions the false accounts about natural phenomena produced by μυθολογεῖν to oppose his own true theory to them, while he cites the other kind of tales that come from μυθολογεῖν

¹⁴ εἰ δ' ἔστιν ὥσπερ μυθολογοῦσί τινες ἐν Παλαιστίνῃ τοιαύτη λίμνη, εἰς ἣν ἐάν τις ἐμβάλῃ συνδήσας ἄνθρωπον ἢ ὑποζύγιον ἐπιπλεῖν καὶ οὐ καταδύεσθαι κατὰ τοῦ ὕδατος, μαρτύριον ἂν εἴη τι τοῖς εἰρημένοις· λέγουσι γὰρ πικρὰν οὕτως εἶναι τὴν λίμνην καὶ ἀλμυρὰν ὥστε μηδένα ἰχθὺν ἐγγίγνεσθαι, τὰ δὲ ἰμάτια ρύπτειν, ἐάν τις διασεῖσθαι βρέξας.

¹⁵ Ibid. 2.359a,11–15.

¹⁶ However, the latter meaning tends to collapse into the former, as the tales about the Olympians are false.

(i.e., the ones about natural phenomena that are not certainly true, and all the ones about the gods) to show that such tales agree with his own theory.¹⁷ As we have seen, the passage on the Dead Sea is an example of the latter kind of reference to *μυθολογεῖν*, as Aristotle notes that, if the reports about the Dead Sea are true, they confirm his theory about the cause of saltiness. However, no myth is necessary for Aristotle to reach philosophical truths.¹⁸ For Aristotle, myths were useful before philosophy, but are generally not worthy of interest for a philosopher.¹⁹

It may be useful to quote the whole comment on this passage given by Olympiodorus before analyzing it:

Olymp. in Mete. 163,9–164,7 (ed. Stüve)

In this text, in five dialectical proofs, Aristotle proves the same thing again, i.e., that the reason that the sea is salty is that some earthy substance, i.e., the smoky exhalation, is mixed with it.

The first of the five dialectical proofs here is this: if we see that everything salty is thick, and that if the thickness of the water increases, the saltiness also increases in the same measure, so that what is very thick is very salty, then clearly the sea is salty, because it is also thick; and it is thick because the smoky exhalation, which is very thick, has been mixed with it. So far as the water is very thick, it is very salty. As a matter of fact, the Dead Sea in Palestine (which is spoken of mythically), being the thickest of all the waters, is also the saltiest. That it is the thickest is clear. A man or another animal, if bound and thrown into the Dead Sea, will be supported by the water and will not sink, because the water is very thick and bears what has fallen upon it. Let no one say that the animal floats because of its power to swim, for we assumed that it has been bound. So, in this way the thickness of the water <of the Dead Sea> is clear. However, it is also clear that it is the Dead Sea water is the saltiest water. First, because it is fit for cleansing all dirt (for it washes the dirt of the clothes more than any other soap), but to cleanse is characteristic of extreme saltiness. Even though salts are cleansing, soda, as it is saltier, cleanses more than salts. For this reason—that is to say,

¹⁷ Also, some tales produced by *μυθολογεῖν* are mentioned by Aristotle as simple asides.

¹⁸ On *μυθολογεῖν* in Aristotle, see Militello (2021).

¹⁹ Arist. *Metaph.* 2.995a,3–6; 3.1000a9–19; 12.1074a,36–1074b,13.

because of the higher salinity—soda is also somewhat bitter. Therefore, it is also clear that this water is infertile, due to its excessive saltiness. In fact, neither fish nor other animals are born in the Dead Sea, because of its saltiness and bitterness.

This is worthy of a difficulty: why did the philosopher say that the Dead Sea is spoken of mythically, even though the existence of such water is visible? Well, we say that he said that it is spoken of mythically insofar it is called dead. For it is mythically called dead, because it is altogether infertile. It is not absurd at all that, being a natural philosopher, Aristotle referred to this sea mythically when he called it dead, if there really is something mythical in natural things, as for example imagination, as it is similar to a myth. For it produces the contents of myth, giving a shape to what has no shape and a figure to what has no figure, just as also myth bestows a body, affections and all such things to incorporeals. This is the first dialectical proof.²⁰

²⁰ Καὶ διὰ τῆς παρουσίας λέξεως ὁ Ἀριστοτέλης τὸ αὐτὸ πάλιν κατασκευάζει διὰ πέντε ἐπιχειρημάτων, ὅτι ἄλμυρά ἐστιν ἡ θάλασσα διὰ τὸ συμμίγνυσθαι αὐτῇ τινα γεώδη οὐσίαν, τουτέστι καπνώδη ἀναθυμιάσιν. ἔστι δὲ τῶν νῦν λεγομένων πέντε ἐπιχειρημάτων τὸ πρῶτον τοιοῦτον· εἰ ὀρώμεν, ὅτι πᾶν ἄλμυρὸν παχύ, καὶ ὅσον ἂν ἐπιτείνηται ἢ τοῦ ὕδατος παχύτης, τοσοῦτον καὶ ἡ ἄλμυρότης, ὡς εἶναι τὸ παχύτατον ἄλμυρώτατον, δηλονότι ἡ θάλασσα ἄλμυρά ἐστιν, ἐπειδὴ καὶ παχεῖα· παχεῖα δ' ἐστὶ διὰ τὸ συμμαίχθαι αὐτῇ τὴν καπνώδη ἀναθυμιάσιν παχυτάτην οὐσαν. ὅτι γὰρ ὅσον παχύτατον ἐστὶ τὸ ὕδωρ, τοσοῦτον γίνεται ἄλμυρώτατον, δηλον. ἰδοὺ γὰρ ἡ ἐν Παλαιστίνῃ Νεκρὰ μυθευομένη θάλασσα παχυτάτη οὐσα ἄλμυρω-τάτη πάντων ἐστὶ τῶν ὑδάτων. καὶ ὅτι παχυτάτη ἐστὶ, δηλον· εἰ γὰρ τις ἄνθρωπον ἢ ἕτερόν τι ζῷον καταδήσας ἐμβάλοι εἰς τὸ τῆς Νεκρᾶς θαλάττης ὕδωρ, ἀνωθεῖται ὑπὸ τοῦ ὕδατος καὶ οὐ γίνεται ὑποβρύχιον διὰ τὸ εἶναι παχὺ πάνυ καὶ βαστάζειν τὸ ἐμπεσόν. καὶ μὴ τις λεγέτω, ὅτι τῇ νηκτικῇ δυνάμει ἐπινηχεται τὸ ζῷον· ὑπόκειται γὰρ δεδεμένον. οὕτω μὲν οὖν δήλη ἐστὶν ἡ τοῦ ὕδατος παχύτης. ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ ὅτι ἄλμυρώτατον ὕδωρ ἐστὶ, δηλον· πρῶτον μὲν ἐπειδὴ ῥυπτικόν ἐστι παντὸς ῥύπου (σημῆει γὰρ τὸν ῥύπον τῶν ἱματίων ἢ ἤπερ ἄλλο τι σημηγμα), τὸ δὲ ῥύπτειν ἄκρας ἐστὶν ἄλμυρότης. ἰδοὺ γὰρ ἅλες μὲν καὶ αὐτοὶ ῥύπτουσι, νίτρον δὲ πλεόν ὡς ἐπιτεταμένην ἔχον τὴν ἄλμυρότητα ἤπερ οἱ ἅλες· ὅθεν καὶ διὰ τὴν ἐπίτασιν ὑπόπικρόν ἐστὶ τὸ νίτρον. ἔπειτα καὶ τὸ εἶναι ἄγονον τὸ ὕδωρ τοῦτο δηλόν ἐστιν ὑπερβαλλούσης ἄλμυρότης· οὐδὲ γὰρ ἰχθὺς ἢ ἄλλο τι ἐγγίνεται ζῷον τῇ Νεκρᾷ θαλάσσῃ διὰ τὴν ἄλμυρότητα καὶ πικρότητα. ἀλλ' ἄξιόν ἐστιν ἀπορίας, τί δήποτε ὁ φιλόσοφος μυθεύεσθαι εἶπε τὴν Νεκρὰν θάλασσαν καίτοι ἐναργοῦς ὄντος τοῦ τοιοῦτου ὕδατος. ἢ λέγομεν, ὅτι μυθεύεσθαι αὐτὴν εἶπε κατὰ τὸ λέγεσθαι νεκρὰν· νεκρὰ γὰρ λέγεται μυθικῶς διὰ τὸ ἄγονον εἶναι παντελῶς. εἰ δὲ φυσικὸς ὢν φιλόσοφος Ἀριστοτέλης μυθικῶς περὶ αὐτῆς διέλαβε νεκρὰν αὐτὴν λέγων, ἄτοπον οὐδέν, εἴ γε καὶ ἐν τοῖς φυσικοῖς ἐστὶ τι μυθῶδες, οἷον ἢ φαντασία. καὶ γὰρ

Olympiodorus frames the passage about the Dead Sea as part of the sixth of eleven arguments used by Aristotle to prove that the saltiness of the sea is due to the presence of the smoky exhalation in it.²¹ The argument goes like this: the level of saltiness and the thickness of a given body of water are directly proportional, so what makes a body of water salty is the same thing that makes it thick; what makes the sea thick is the smoky exhalation, which is very thick;²² so the smoky exhalation is also the cause of the saltiness of the sea. This argument is not explicit in Aristotle, and what Aristotle actually says—i.e., the description of the peculiar features of the Dead Sea—is interpreted by Olympiodorus as a proof of the premise that saltiness and thickness go hand in hand. The fact that the water of the Dead Sea is both extremely thick and extremely salty shows that these two attributes are correlated. Here Olympiodorus rephrases Aristotle’s proofs of the thickness and saltiness of the Dead Sea, but he also adds some clarifying remarks of his own. For example, he makes it clear that the “lake in Palestine” Aristotle refers to is the body of water that at the time Olympiodorus lived was already called the Dead Sea. Olympiodorus also explains the reason why Aristotle specifies that the floating animal was bound before it was thrown in the lake. Without this specification, one could argue that the animal floats because it swims. By making it clear that the limbs of the animal have been tied, Aristotle rules out this explanation, leaving water’s high thickness as the only cause of the phenomenon. Finally, while Aristotle leaves the link between the cleaning power of a given kind of water and its salinity level implicit, Olympiodorus briefly discusses this link. He proves that saltier water makes for better washing by noting that soda (νίτρον) is both more effective when washing and more saltier than salt (ἄλας).²³ Given this premise, one can understand why Aristotle says that the water of the Dead Sea, which is the best cleaning agent in the world, must be the saltiest water.

αὕτη οἷόν τις μῦθος ἐστὶ· τὰ γὰρ μύθου ποιεῖ μορφοῦσα τὰ ἄμορφα καὶ σχηματίζουσα τὰ ἀσχημάτιστα, ὡς καὶ ὁ μῦθος τοῖς ἀσωμάτοις σῶμα καὶ πάθη καὶ ὄσα τοιαῦτα περικτῆσι. τοῦτο μὲν τὸ πρῶτον ἐπιχείρημα.

²¹ Olympiodorus analyzes the first six proofs in lecture 23, and the following five in lecture 24.

²² Technically, this does not prove that the smoky exhalation *must* be the cause of the thickness of the sea.

²³ Again, that the correlation between cleaning power and saltiness is true in the case of soda and salt is not strictly a proof that this correlation applies in all cases.

Olympiodorus is not only interested in explaining why the peculiar features of the Dead Sea prove that the saltiness of the water of the sea is due to the admixture of the smoky exhalation, though. Indeed, he is particularly impressed by Aristotle's use of *μυθολογεῖν*—so impressed that, according to him, this verb deserves a specific analysis.²⁴ At first, Olympiodorus may seem to consider the meaning of *μυθολογεῖν* as giving a report that may turn out false (the correct reading in my eyes), as he wonders why Aristotle uses this verb, “even though the existence of such water is visible” (καίτοι ἐναργοῦς ὄντος τοῦ τοιούτου ὕδατος). One may think that Olympiodorus is stating that it is odd for Aristotle to talk about a possibly false account in the case of a phenomenon that is clearly true. I do not think this is the case, though. In fact, in the rest of the excursus Olympiodorus will clearly refer to myth, that is to say, to the kind of tale that poets and philosophers sometimes tell. Specifically, he will say that myth bestows a body to what has no body. But *ἐναργής* means “having a visible form, a bodily shape”. So, when Olympiodorus says that he is bewildered by the reference to *μυθολογεῖν* in the case of something *ἐναργής*, he does not mean that it is odd to speak of a possibly false report on something that is clearly true, but rather that, given that myths give a body to incorporeals, it is odd to speak of a myth about something that already has a body. I think that the reason why Olympiodorus interprets *μυθολογεῖν* as a reference to myth rather than to accounts whose truth status is uncertain is that he is accustomed to think about *μῦθος* as a specific kind of discourse, the one where a false surface meaning refers to a hidden truth. As a result, Olympiodorus is led to interpret any mention of *μῦθοι* as a reference to the images poets and philosophers use to allude to higher truths. Olympiodorus is reading Aristotle from a Platonic point of view.

The exact wording of the question asked by Olympiodorus is probably influenced by the answer he has in mind. The commentator does not ask why Aristotle states that “some say mythically” (*μυθολογοῦσίν τινες*) that the Dead Sea is particularly thick. The commentator wonders instead why Aristotle says that the Dead Sea “is spoken of mythically”

²⁴ This attitude sharply differs from the other author of a commentary on *Meteorology* that has reached us, Alexander of Aphrodisias, who does not elaborate on Aristotle's use of *μυθολογεῖν*. In his analysis of the passage, Alexander just says that an example of the addition of an earthy substance to water is given “by some stories” (*ἀπὸ ἱστοριῶν τινῶν*, Alex. Aphr. in *Mete.* 88,9 [ed. Hayduck]) about a lake in Palestine. Alexander's comment on the features of the Dead Sea is *ibid.* in *Mete.* 88,7–14.

(μυθεύεσθαι). It may seem that this choice of word is accidental, but I argue that this is not the case. First, Olympiodorus has already used the same wording earlier in this passage: when he paraphrased Aristotle's reference to the lake in Palestine, he introduced the subject as "the Dead Sea in Palestine, which is spoken of mythically (μυθενομένη)". Second, this more general way of asking the question about Aristotle's reference to myth allows Olympiodorus to give an answer that does not refer anymore to the original report that is called 'not necessarily true' or 'mythical' by Aristotle. Had Olympiodorus repeated Aristotle's words faithfully when formulating the question about them, he would have had to focus his answer on the thickness of the water of the Dead Sea. That is to say, let us assume that the question were the following: why did Aristotle say that some say mythically that the water of the Dead Sea can support a bound animal? In this case, Olympiodorus would have been forced to answer that the report about *the peculiar thickness of this water* is categorized as mythical by Aristotle because of such and such reason. However, given that Olympiodorus has phrased the question as being about *the Dead Sea as a whole*, his answer does not have to refer to its thickness. The question is: why did Aristotle say that the Dead Sea is spoken of mythically? As a consequence, the number of possible answers is way higher than in the case of the more intuitive question, as any feature of the Dead Sea, even if it is not the thickness of its water, can explain the reference to myth.

Indeed, according to Olympiodorus, Aristotle's mention of myth is explained by a feature of the Dead Sea that is totally different from the density of its water—such feature being its name. The commentator states that what is mythical in the Dead Sea is that it is called "dead". Olympiodorus explains that this name alludes to the fact that no fish can live in it. This answer to the question why Aristotle refers to mythical language in the commented passage is not satisfactory, for at least three reasons. First of all, calling the lake "Dead Sea" does not seem a good example of speaking mythically. Sure, there is a label ("dead") that is literally false (as a body of water is not something that can be alive or dead) but refers to a truth (the inability of the lake to support life). However, a label is not a tale, and myths should be tales; also, the 'concealed' truth is not about something invisible, as in the case of proper myths. Moreover, Aristotle *does not* mention the name "Dead Sea", so it would be odd for him to mean that name when he refers to the object of the μυθολογεῖν. Indeed (and this is the third reason why Olympiodorus' answer is not particularly good), Aristotle *could not* mention this name, as it was given after his death. The first mentions of

the name Dead Sea can be found in authors of the second century AD such as Pausanias and Galen.²⁵ However, we can exonerate Olympiodorus from this last mistake, as generally commentators had little awareness of the differences between their world and Aristotle's.

Summing up, Olympiodorus gives an unsatisfactory answer to an ill-posed question. Specifically, Olympiodorus asks why Aristotle said that the Dead Sea is talked of mythically, but Aristotle wrote of an unreliable tale (not a myth) about the density of the water of that lake specifically (not about the lake generally). Similarly, Olympiodorus' answer refers to a feature of the Dead Sea (its name) that Aristotle did not mention—indeed, he could not even know about it—and that is not a good example of mythical language anyway.

Given these shortcomings of Olympiodorus' excursus on Aristotle's use of *μυθολογεῖν*, one may wonder why the commentator even made this digression. I think that the answer could be that he wanted to tell his students about the relationship between myth and imagination. As a matter of fact, after explaining what is mythical in Aristotle's account of the Dead Sea, Olympiodorus wonders whether we should consider odd that a natural philosopher like Aristotle expresses himself mythically, and this question gives him the chance to make a digression within the digression and talk about myth and imagination, as he answers that it is not out of place for someone who studies nature to refer to myth, because there are things that are akin to myth (*μυθῶδες*) in nature, for example imagination.

Olympiodorus also tells that myth and imagination are related in his 46th lecture on *Gorgias*. Here, the commentator states that “the imagination enjoys myths”,²⁶ that, if the only psychological faculty we had were imagination, “it would be necessary for us to live all our life as if in a myth” (*ἔδει ἡμᾶς ἅπαντα τὸν βίον μυθῶδη ἔχειν*),²⁷ and that myths have the function of stimulating those human beings who, living according to imagination, do not benefit from demonstrations or opinions.²⁸

²⁵ Paus. 5.7.4,10; 5.7.5,1 (ed. Spiro). Gal. *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus* 11.690,10; 11.692,8–9; 12.203,11; 12.373,1–2; 375,12–13 (ed. Kühn).

²⁶ τοῦ φανταστικοῦ χαίροντος τοῖς μύθοις. Olymp. *in Gorg.* 46.3,4–5 (ed. Westerink). Tr. Jackson, Lycos and Tarrant.

²⁷ Ibid. 46.6,21. Tr. Jackson, Lycos and Tarrant.

²⁸ Ibid. 46.6,26–27.

In the commentary on *Meteorology*, Olympiodorus says something more about the link between φαντασία and μῦθος. He explains the statement that imagination is like myth by saying that imagination “produces the contents of myth, giving a shape to what has no shape (μορφοῦσα τὰ ἄμορφα) and a figure to what has no figure (σχηματίζουσα τὰ ἀσχημάτιστα), just as (ὡς) also myth bestows (περιτίθησι) a body (σῶμα), affections and all such things to incorporeals (τοῖς ἀσωμάτοις).”²⁹

Before focusing on the relationship between myth and imagination, it is necessary to check whether the reference to both shape (μορφή) and figure (σχῆμα) is significant, as this could be a crucial element to understand the meaning of this passage. On one hand, Olympiodorus may mean to distinguish these two kinds of physical forms, just as he does in the commentary on chapter 8 of the *Categories*, on quality. There Olympiodorus states that figure belongs to inanimate things, shape to animate beings; in another sense, mathematical entities have figures, natural beings have shapes.³⁰

On the other hand, no meaningful distinction between σχῆμα and μορφή has been detected in the texts that could have been Olympiodorus’ source. Indeed, the two closest passages to Olympiodorus’ in authors who lived before him can be found in two of Proclus’ works.³¹ In his commentary on the first book of Euclid’s *Elements*, Proclus formulates a problem in the following manner:

Procl. *in Euc.* 94,19–25 (ed. Friedlein)

Similarly, someone could raise the following difficulty: Given that imagination receives everything as shaped (μορφωτικῶς) and divided, how does the geometer contemplate in imagination a point, i.e. something without parts? For imagination receives not

²⁹ There can be no doubt that here ὡς introduces a simile. In the previous sentence, Olympiodorus has likened imagination and myth, stating that the former “is similar to a myth” (οἷόν τις μῦθος ἐστι, line 4), so now he explains what makes these two things similar to each other.

³⁰ Olymp. *in Cat.* 116,33–36 (ed. Busse). On the difference between shapes and figures in Neoplatonism, see Kobec (2017) 789 n. 38 and Schwark (2019).

³¹ Another text that has some similarities with Olympiodorus’, even though arguably it is not as close as the Proclean passages I cite, is Phlp. *in Ph.* 114,5–12 (ed. Vitelli). Here, Philoponus states that the arts that apply figure and shape to what has no figure and shape do not make their object from its contrary, but rather from its privation.

only the concepts that are in reason, but also the appearances of intelligible and divine forms according to its own nature, offering shapes of what has no shape and figures of what has no figure (τῶν μὲν ἀμόρφων μορφὰς τῶν δὲ ἀσχηματίστων σχήματα προτείνουσα).³²

Proclus expresses himself in similar terms in his commentary on the *Republic*, when, discussing the description of the Fates (who are goddesses) in the myth of Er, he states that it is normal to conceive what is incorporeal as having a body,³³ and explains the reason why this is the case:

Procl. *in R.* 2.241,22–27

The ancient theurgists taught us that it is necessary that the appearances of the gods are shaped <appearances> of what is without shape (μεμορφωμένας τῶν ἀμορφώτων) and <appearances> arranged in figures of what has no figure (ἐσχηματισμένας τῶν ἀσχηματίστων), because the soul receives the stable and simple appearances³⁴ of the gods according to its own nature—<that is to say> as divided—and with the aid of imagination joins figure and shape (σχῆμα καὶ μορφήν) to what it sees.³⁵

In both passages, Proclus states that imagination gives shape to the shapeless and figure to the figureless.³⁶ Also, in the context of the

³² Ἴσως δ' ἂν τις ἀπορήσειεν, πῶς πάντα μορφωτικῶς καὶ μεριστῶς τῆς φαντασίας δεχομένης ἀμερές τι σημεῖον ὁ γεωμέτρης ἐν αὐτῇ θεωρεῖ. μὴ γὰρ ὅτι τοὺς ἐν διανοίᾳ λόγους, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς τῶν νοερῶν καὶ θείων εἰδῶν ἐμφάσεις ἢ φαντασία κατὰ τὴν οἰκειᾶν δέχεται φύσιν, τῶν μὲν ἀμόρφων μορφὰς τῶν δὲ ἀσχηματίστων σχήματα προτείνουσα.

³³ Procl. *in R.* 2.241,19–22 (ed. Kroll).

³⁴ καὶ τὰ ἀτρεμῆ καὶ τὰ ἀπλᾶ φάσματα: this is a quotation from *Phdr.* 250c1 (ed. Burnet).

³⁵ πάλαι καὶ τῶν <θεουργῶν> ἡμᾶς διδασκάντων, ὅτι τὰς αὐτοφανεῖας τῶν θεῶν μεμορφωμένας τῶν ἀμορφώτων καὶ ἐσχηματισμένας τῶν ἀσχηματίστων ἀνάγκη γίνεσθαι, τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ τὰ ἀτρεμῆ καὶ τὰ ἀπλᾶ φάσματα τῶν θεῶν κατὰ τὴν ἑαυτῆς φύσιν ὑποδεχομένης μεριστῶς καὶ μετὰ φαντασίας σχῆμα καὶ μορφήν συναγούσης τοῖς θεάμασιν.

³⁶ Of course there are more parallels between the two passages: imagination receives (the verb used by Proclus is δέχομαι/ὑποδέχομαι) images; it does so according to its own nature (κατὰ τὴν οἰκειᾶν/ἑαυτῆς φύσιν); this means that it receives them as divided (μεριστῶς); even the nouns used by Proclus to denote the objects received by imagination (ἐμφασίς, αὐτοφάνεια, φάσμα) are closely related,

second passage, Proclus talks about the gods as incorporeals that are imagined as having a body. Since both these theses can be found in Olympiodorus' discussion of the similarities between myth and imagination, it is likely that Olympiodorus is influenced—either directly or indirectly—by Proclus, as is generally the case with Olympiodorus' theses about φαντασία and μύθος.³⁷ I have not been able to find any study where Proclus' mention of both μορφή and σχῆμα in these passages is considered significant.³⁸

All in all, there is not enough evidence to tell what Olympiodorus means when he refers to shape and figure separately as the means by which imagination makes the intelligible easier to grasp. It is possible that he just copied the words his ultimate source, Proclus, used when describing the activity of imagination. Proclus, in turn, uses μορφή and σχῆμα as two qualities that, for example, the appearances of gods can have. This seems to rule out the possibility that for him shape and figure belong to different kinds of beings (as in the two hypotheses put forward by Olympiodorus in his commentary on the *Categories*). Rather, Proclus may have accepted the thesis we find in Simplicius: shape is figure with color.³⁹ If this were the case, Proclus would mean that imagination gives physical boundaries and (at least in some cases) hues to intelligible beings. In any case, the mention of both shape and figure by Olympiodorus does not seem relevant to his account of how imagination and myth are related. The commentator just wants to say, using a standard phrasing, that imagination gives physical qualities to things that do not belong to the physical realm. It is this that is relevant to the relationship between μύθος and φαντασία.

We can now try to understand how imagination is linked to myth in the quoted passage. Olympiodorus seems to highlight two different

as they all derive from φαίνομαι (also, θεωρέω is used to denote the act of contemplating the objects of imagination both at *in Euc.* 94,21 and at *in R.* 2.241,19). However, these parallels are not particularly relevant to the discussion of Olympiodorus's passage on imagination and myth in the commentary on *Meteorology*.

³⁷ See Sheppard (2014) 62-63 and 92.

³⁸ Christoph Helmig cites the passage of the commentary on Euclid as an example of Proclus stating that imagination is μορφοτικῶς (Helmig [2012] 230 n. 45). It is not clear whether Alain Lernould is referring to a distinction between μορφή and σχῆμα when he states that, in the mentioned passage of the commentary on Euclid, Proclus expresses the idea that imagination gives “extension, shape, divisibility” (Lernould [2013] 605 n. 32) to both mathematical objects and intellectual forms.

³⁹ On Simplicius' thesis, see Schwark (2019).

sides of the relationship between imagination and myth. On one hand, Olympiodorus expresses the similitude between them, in that they both provide a sensible nature to things that are not sensible. Olympiodorus does not provide examples here, but he would probably agree with the following ones. Thanks to imagination, we can visualize the concept of the circle as a visible figure; that is to say, imagination gives a figure to the circle, which in itself has no figure. As for myth, one can quote Olympiodorus himself. For example, in his commentary on *Gorgias* he says that the idea that intellect turns into itself is represented by poets through the myth of Cronus eating his own children.⁴⁰ In this way, myth gives a body to the incorporeal power of intellect. The circle and the intellect are not sensible beings, but they become such thanks respectively to imagination and myth.

Olympiodorus is not just comparing imagination and myth, though. He is also linking these two parts of human life through a causal link. As a matter of fact, he states that imagination is what produces myths. The psychological power that lets us conceive what is not bodily as bodily is imagination, so in order to translate (so to speak) incorporeals in bodily beings, we need imagination. From this point of view, Olympiodorus is not making a distinction between different kinds of sensible properties that, respectively, imagination and myth bestow on non-sensible realities. He is not stating that imagination gives shape and figure, whereas myth gives body and affections. If this were what Olympiodorus was saying, he could not state that imagination produces the element of myths. But this is what he states, so, if in myth incorporeals take a body, it must be imagination that gives them that body. Indeed, that imagination provides a body to what has no body is something Olympiodorus says explicitly elsewhere, referring even to gods specifically. In his commentary on *First Alcibiades*, he says:

in Alc. I 51,12-15 (ed. Westerink)

For imagination is always available to our soul, as our soul is constantly fashioning impressions of what it does not know, and bestowing (περιτιθεῖσα) shapes (σχήματα), sizes, and bodies (σώματα) on the non-bodily (τοῖς ἀσωμάτοις), and confining even the god in terms of place.⁴¹ (tr. Griffin)

⁴⁰ Olymp. *in Gorg.* 47.3,6-8.

⁴¹ πάρεστι γὰρ αἰεὶ τῇ ἡμετέρᾳ ψυχῇ ἢ φαντασίᾳ, τύπους ἀναπλάττουσα ὧν ἀγνοεῖ ἢ ψυχῇ καὶ τοῖς ἀσωμάτοις σχήματα καὶ μεγέθη καὶ σώματα περιτιθεῖσα καὶ τόπων περιόριζουσα τὸν θεόν.

And in the sixth lecture on *Phaedo* he says:

Olymp. *in Phd.* 6.2,14-15 (ed. Westerink)

This, the influence of imagination upon their thought, also caused the Stoic community to think of God as corporeal, for it is imagination that clothes incorporeal realities in bodies (τοῖς ἀσωμάτοις σώματα περιτίθησιν).⁴² (tr. Westerink)

For Olympiodorus, it is imagination that gives a body to what has no body.

The two theories of the relationship between imagination and myth conveyed in the statement from the commentary on *Meteorology* may seem contradictory. The first theory has imagination and myth as two items that can be compared: as imagination gives a figure to what has no figure, so myth gives a body to what has no body. However, in the second theory, imagination is the cause of myth: imagination gives a body to incorporeals, and this makes myths possible. However, there is no contradiction, if one considers bodies (and the passions they cause) as a subset of the figures and shapes that imagination produces. In other words, Olympiodorus is stating that imagination generally gives sensible properties to what is not sensible; this includes giving a body to incorporeals, which is the basis of myths; so imagination is the maker of myths.⁴³

We have seen that some statements on imagination and myth in Olympiodorus' commentaries on Plato's dialogues can be better understood in light of a passage of his commentary on Aristotle's *Meteorology*. The meaning of this passage, in turn, can be fully grasped only by turning to the Platonic commentaries. All in all, considering both the Platonic and the Aristotelian commentaries seems the best way to understand Olympiodorus' thought.

⁴² διὸ καὶ ὁ φιλόσοφος χορὸς ὁ τῶν Στωϊκῶν διὰ τὸ κατὰ φαντασίαν ἐνεργεῖν σῶμα τὸν θεὸν ὑπέλαβον· αὕτη γὰρ τοῖς ἀσωμάτοις σώματα περιτίθησιν.

⁴³ On a different role that imagination plays according to Olympiodorus, see Layne (2021) 97-100.

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