

The Cave and the Cellar: investigating a possible Plato/ Grimmelshausen link

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I: Introduction

The idea for this essay emerged out of an in class discussion on Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus*. One of the questions that arose at that time was whether *Simplicissimus*' experience in Book II, Chapter V could in any way be connected with Plato's famous Cave passage from book VII of *The Republic*¹. Apart from its intrinsic appeal, the proposed exercise had an additional value, for through it, I was able to gain some additional insight which furthered my attempt at understanding the nature of anthropological interconnectivity between texts². Although the attempt to merge this examination of Grimmelshausen's work into the greater framework of the greater enterprise was aborted due mainly to the diffusionary quality of the evidence uncovered³, it nevertheless influenced the methodology I use here. What has been avoided, therefore, is a broad examination of *Simplicissimus* in light of Platonic ideas. Instead, this essay will focus on the image of the cave and the themes accompanying it in Grimmelshausen's work.

Before delving into the fray, let me quickly outline the path my investigation will take. Given the parameters of this work, I shall refrain from a reiteration of Plato's work: it is therefore required that the reader be familiar with the passage in question. Part one of this essay consists in an examination of the aforementioned cellar passage in *Simplicissimus* and of its connections with Plato's *Republic*. In the second part, some of these connections will be reexamined in light of a second passage from Grimmelshausen's work, more specifically chapters twenty-four to twenty-six of book VI, in which the image of the cave again becomes

1 The work used here is Plato: The Collected Dialogues, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns eds.

2 I refer here to my previous essay entitled "Kafka and Jünger: Symbols and Intertextual Connections".

3 In Volker Meid's introduction to the text, he mentions that in all likelihood Grimmelshausen was well acquainted with the works of the ancients (see pp. 10-12). Such direct contact with Ancient Greek culture and thought makes it all but impossible to argue and prove that the genesis of similar ideas was not the result of direct diffusionary processes. Thus, a Grimmelshausen/Plato comparison is of little utility if to be used as an example of an independent emergence of symbolic similarities when two texts are separated by the time factor. Still, it is useful as a model for future analyses of texts in which there is a time or geographical differential.

dominant. We will then be in a position to conclude that the Grimmelshausen/Plato connection is more tenuous than it seemed at first glance.

II: The Cellar Scene

If a connection to Plato's cave does exist, it is essential that we look past the imagery that we are left with in Grimmelshausen's cellar scene. Although on a superficial level some similarities do exist (i.e. the darkness of the cellar which could translate to the unilluminated cave, the fires that dominate the imagery in both stories) it is crucial to note that while Plato's cave is a broad metaphor for human existence as a whole, Grimmelshausen's cellar, which in essence is a primitive recreation of the Christian idea of hell, does not carry the depth of abstraction which can justify any direct relationship with the former. It is only when we look at Simplicissimus' fate in greater detail that we can recognize parallels with the platonic cave.

In order to understand the incident in the cellar, we must look at the evolution of the character of Simplicissimus up to that point in the plot, especially the events immediately preceding it. At the beginning of Grimmelshausen's work, the image of the young Simplicissimus is that of a human being utterly unable to understand the abstractions that are inherent in language, even at the most primitive level. Take the following discussion between the hermit and the young boy:

... da der Einsiedler vor mir stunde, und sagte „ Uff Kleener, ich will dir Essen geben, und alsdann den Weg durch den Wald weisen, damit du wieder zu den Leuten , und noch vor Nacht in das nächste Dorff kommest"; ich fragte ihn: „ Was sind das für Dinger, Leuten und Dorf?" Er sagte:„ Bist du dann niemals in keinem Dorf gewest...?" „Nein" sagte ich „ nirgends als hier bin ich gewest..."(65).

The discussion in chapter eight illustrates this point further, for here it becomes apparent that

1 Note the inconsistency here. Simplicissimus is unable to grasp obvious words such as 'village' or 'people'. He is, however, quite capable of using the term 'Dinge' (things) which in itself is already an abstraction, for it requires the ability of the speaker to group a number of different objects under one heading.

Simplicissimus is unable even to give his name. Can Grimmelshausen's character, as he appears at the beginning of his work, be compared to Plato's prisoners who have their "legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, [unable to] see anything of themselves or of one another except the shadows cast from the fire on the wall of the cave ..." (Book VII, 514a-b)? To answer this, let us look at the problem at hand -- the ability to abstract -- more closely.

Let V stand for village. The situation that would arise in Plato's cavern is that the prisoners (P's) would only see the shadow (V^3) of the abstraction of a village (V^2). The following diagram illustrates the prisoners' situation.

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If we now substitute Simplicissimus for the prisoners, we shall see by the ensuing diagram, that the problem here is of a different nature.

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P, here, is unable to recognize the relationship between V and 'V' where 'V' is the symbol for V. When we compare the situation with that of Plato's prisoners who, due to their circumstance, cannot recognize the relationship between V^3 and V, we can see that a significant difference does exist between the situation of Simplicissimus and Plato's prisoners: whereas Simplicissimus can see the thing itself but is unable to grasp the abstraction, i.e. the word that one uses when referring to it, Plato's prisoners see only the abstraction of an abstraction and are unable to see the thing itself, or as Plato himself states, "[the] prisoners would deem reality to be nothing else than the shadows of the artificial object" (Book VII, 515c). The commonality here is limited to one point, although it is a fundamental one: in both cases the subjects are unable to internalize the relationship that lies at the heart of human existence. In short, neither Simplicissimus nor the prisoners are able to recognize the truth as it pertains to the reality in which they exist.

Let us now return to the cellar incident in Grimmelshausen's work. By the time that Simplicissimus enters 'hell', he has progressed significantly in his ability to discern between the

thing-in-itself and its abstraction. Further, in the chapter preceding the incident, he becomes aware, for the first time, that there is a significant difference between the appearance of an object and its true nature -- the 'Schein/Sein dichotomy'. As Simplicissimus describes it:

Ich einfältiger Tropf war selbst geschickt genug, den klugen Commissarium (zu welchen Ämtern und Verrichtungen man wahrlich keine Kinder nemmt) zu betrügen , welches ich eher als einer Stunde lernet... (157).

By pretending to be a drummer, Simplicissimus has, in effect, learned how to lie, which proves to be a significant step on his way to self-awareness. It is ironic, then, that soon after this 'moment of truth', Simplicissimus is forced down into the metaphorical hell in which, as we shall see, his newfound knowledge poses a danger .

It is during Simplicissimus' 'descent to the cellar' that we are able to find the closest connection to Plato's cave analogy. In the following passage, Plato argues that if a man, having seen the external world (i.e. the truth), is to return to the cave, his knowledge will pose a danger to him:

Now if he should be required to contend with these perpetual prisoners in evaluating these shadows ... would he not provoke laughter, and would it not be said of him that he had returned from his journey aloft with his eyes ruined and that it was not worthwhile even to attempt to ascend? And if it were possible to lay hands on and to kill the man who tried to release them, would they not kill him?(Book VII, 517a)

Like the returnee, Simplicissimus faces a grave danger if he lets on that he is aware of the truth behind the illusions of the ritual that he is to undergo, as the priest's warning seems to indicate:

... und wenn man dich in dieser verfluchten Kur haben wird, so achte und glaube nicht alles, was man dich überreden will, und stelle dich doch, als wenn du alles glaubtest, rede wenig, damit

deine Zugeordnete nicht an dir merken, daß sie leer Stroh dreschen, sonst werden sich deine Plagen verändern, wiewohl ich nit wissen kann, auf was Weis sie mit dir umgehen werden ...(158).

Little doubt exists that the potential for danger is real. Still, it quickly becomes apparent that Simplicissimus, having grasped the truth behind the deception of the devils, emerges as the master of the situation:

Die arme Teufel wollten ihre Sprach und Stimmen verquanten, damit ich sie nicht kennen sollte, ich merkte aber gleich, daß es meines Herrn Furierschützen waren; doch ließ ichs mich nicht merken, sondern lachte in die Faust, daß diese, so mich zum Narren machen sollten, meine Narren sein mußten (159).

Although the appearance that he is about to take on will make him seem ridiculous, it will also serve as a symbol of Simplicissimus' emerging superiority as it pertains to identifying the true nature of the human condition. In this he resembles Plato's returning prisoner, for Plato stipulates that "a man returning from divine contemplations to the petty miseries of men cuts a sorry figure and appears most ridiculous"(Book VII, 517d). Though equating Simplicissimus' knowledge at the moment of his descent into the cellar with that of a "man returning from divine contemplation" would be an overstatement, to say the least, it should be acknowledged that the basic mechanisms, namely the recognition of truth and the danger that accompanies such a process, is evident in both works. Whether or not this evidence is sufficient to establish a definite link between the two authors remains a point of contention, for although the similarities cited should add some weight in favour of such a link, it must also be noted that all of the evidence is

circumstantial; that is, it relies for its plausibility upon the antecedents of the relevant conditionals being true (i.e. supposition Y follows only if we are correct in assuming X to be the case). Let us, then, take this comparison a step further by moving to the end of Grimmelshausen's work.

III: The Island and the Cave

The cave symbol reemerges in the sixth book. Having been shipwrecked on the island, Simplicissimus flees into the cave when a shipload of sailors invades his privacy¹. Although like the island itself, the cave on it is of a highly allegorical nature, it nevertheless shows little resemblance, both in its appearance and its function, to the one in *The Republic*. First, Simplicissimus' refuge initially lacks any light. Thus, to the uninitiated, the cave resembles more a Minoan labyrinth than a prison. Further, unlike Plato's cave, it no longer serves as a place which is farthest removed from the ideal of truth. By eliminating light altogether, thereby eliminating the shadows as well, it could be argued that Grimmelshausen no longer allows for those elements in Plato that represent falsehood, i.e. the fire, the shadows, etc.. Even if this idea is rejected for being too speculative, it cannot be denied that by placing Simplicissimus at the centre of the cave, and by making him the sole figure of salvation (symbolized, for example, by his possession of the glowing insects), Grimmelshausen transforms the realm of ignorance into a realm of truth, thereby inverting the allegorical intent of Plato's creation.

Other elements in Grimmelshausen's work point in the same direction. There is little doubt that the older Simplicissimus possesses many of the qualities that Plato demands of a philosopher². The priest from the ship, for example, describes Simplicissimus in the following manner:

1 See book VI, chapters 24-26.

2 See *The Republic* passages 516-520.

So weit kommt ein Mensch auf dieser Welt und nicht höher, es wolle ihm dann Gott das höchste Gut aus Gnaden mehr offenbaren (697).

His wisdom and generosity, as shown in his behaviour towards the sailors, provide further evidence that Simplicissimus has reached the pinnacle of self-realization.

Still, Simplicissimus differs from Plato's ideal in one significant way, namely, in that he refuses to leave his self-styled 'Garden of Eden'. Plato argues as follows:

It is the duty of us ... to compel the best natures to attain the knowledge which pronounced the greatest, and to win the vision of the good, to scale that ascent, and when they have reached the heights and taken an adequate view, we must not allow ... that they should linger there ... and refuse to go down again among the bondsmen and share their labours and honours (Book VII, 519c-d).

Simplicissimus, on the other hand, in his final discussions with the captain, steadfastly refuses to return to the world of "Krieg, Brand, Mord, Raub ..." (709); communal good for Grimmelshausen seems to be of lesser importance than individual fulfillment and self-actualization. Herein, then, lies the most fundamental split between the ideas of the two authors; consequently, it can be argued that the central (i.e. motivating) thesis of Plato's cave metaphor is not apparent in the creation of Simplicissimus' last refuge.

IV: Conclusion

A review of the evidence in its totality leads me to the following conclusion: while some platonic elements might have been incorporated in the 'cellar scene', sufficient incongruities remain to leave room for some doubt. The examination of the cave image which appears at the

end of Grimmelshausen's work further indicates that even if some elements of Plato's cave analogy surfaced in Simplicissimus' 'descent into hell', little, if any, of those survive at the end of the work. Yet, only a broader examination of Grimmelshausen's work in light of Plato's overall philosophy will provide proof positive one way or another.

V. Bibliography

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