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## ARCESILAUS' MIST OF UN-KNOWING

Rubén Soto Rivera<sup>1</sup>  
Puerto Rico

*Aut sapit Archesilas, et prospicit ultima rerum,  
Aut si contem[p]nit, non sapit Archesilas  
(Godfrey of Winchester  
[Godefridi Prioris Epigrammata, XXX.  
Exitus rerum inspiciendos]).<sup>1</sup>*

### Abstract

Some famous authors of the Renaissance reinterpreted "Arkesilaos" of Pitane as meaning "the one who rules", i.e., God as Summus Rex, having they based their

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<sup>1</sup> Doctor en Filosofía y Letras. Su tesis: *La temporalidad tempestiva en la obra literaria de Baltasar Gracián*. Catedrático, Departamento de Humanidades, Universidad de Puerto Rico en Humacao. Ha publicado *Consideraciones tempestivas acerca de la Celestina y de la Hora de Todos*, y la *Fortuna con seso*; *Lo Uno y la Díada Indefinida: sus antecedentes desde Platón hasta Numenio*. También es autor de numerosos artículos de literatura y de filosofía editados en distintas publicaciones de Puerto Rico, Colombia, Chile y Argentina. Pertenece al *Consejo Consultivo Internacional de Konvergencias, Filosofía y Culturas en Diálogo*.

reinterpretation on the fact that some Middle Ages theologians have read "Archesilas", instead of "Arcesilas". So, from Homer's Ilias' "Arkesilaos" and Arkesilaos founder of the Middle Academy, till Eusthatus of Bizantium, who deciphered that Greek name as meaning "the one who pleases the people", none allegorical apotheosis of him we've met, till the Classic Latin transliteration "Arcesilas" was turned into the Medieval Latin "Archesilas", into which "ch" has been seen as equivalent to the Greek letter "X" ("Khi", "Chi", in "APXH").

*Key Words:* Arkesilaos, Arcesilas, Archesilas, allegory, bucolic poetry, Boccaccio

According to Epiphanius of Salamis (between 310/320–403 C.E.), *Arcesilaus* said that the truth is accessible to God alone, but not to man (*Panarion*, 933), and *Carneades* was of the same opinion as *Arcesilaus* (*Panarion*, 9.34).<sup>2</sup> Of course, this doxography looks heavily influenced by christian orthodoxy. Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus (c. 160–c. 225 C.E.) has clearly stated in his *Ad Nationes* (197 C.E.) that: «In like manner, Arcesilaus makes a threefold form of the divinity -the Olympian, the Astral, the Titanian- sprung from Coelus and Terra; from which through Saturn and Ops came Neptune, Jupiter, and Orcus, and their entire progeny»<sup>3</sup> (*Aequae Arcesilaus trinam formam diuinitatis inducit, Olympios, Astra, Titanios, de Caelo et Terra; ex his, Saturno et Ope, Neptunum, Iouem et Orcum, et ceteram successionem* [Q. S. Fl. Tertulliani *Ad Nat.*, 2.2.15]).<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, Epiphanius would have interpreted this testimony as a foreshadow of Catholic Church dogma of Trinity.<sup>5</sup> It seems that Eusebius of Caesarea' exegetical hermeneutics in his *Praeparatio Evangelica* (written in the early part of the fourth century C.E.) has been actively working in many Fathers of the Church in order to revindicate the universalism of Christian Religion, drawing parallels with Greek Philosopher's doctrines.

In the Renaissance, Arcesilas became not only a forerunner of God's Fountain-Head of Truth and Trinity, but also a symbol of God, the Father Himself. What a such an irony History of Ideas and Beliefs treasures for anyone of us! Giovanni Boccaccio coined "Arkesilaos" as an enigmatic name for God-Head Himself. Here it is:

## OLYMPIA

*HIGH, on a grassy mound, in glory sits  
Arcesilas, shepherding flocks and worlds.  
But, verily, would'st thou His aspect know.  
It were in vain; the mind this cannot grasp.  
All life is He, too fair, wholly serene;  
And in His bosom rests a Lamb, milk-white,  
Sweet Sustenance for folk, whereby we live;  
Thence comes our weal, and life to those re-born.<sup>6</sup>*

## OLYMPIA

200 *Hac in gramineo summo sedet aggere grandis  
Archesilas, servatque greges et temperat orbis:  
cuius enim si forte velis describere vultus,  
in cassum facies: nequeunt comprehendere mentes  
Est alacer pulcherque nimis totusque serenus,*  
205 *huius et in gremio iacet agnus candidus, ex quo  
silvicolis gratus cibus est, et vescimur illo;  
inde salus venit nobis et vita renatis [Bucolicum carmen, XIV: "Olimpia"].*

It will suffice for us to quote a couple of authors commenting those Boccaccio' verses. Vladimiro Zabughin says: «*Non comune invece è ciò che Olimpia-Violante dice in seguito. Archesilao, Dio Padre, siede in trono; la Sua bellezza è inesprimibile: è grande, bello, tutto sereno*». <sup>7</sup> As for M. J. Mc Gann, we can glean from him the same allegorical harvest:

Elsewhere in the poem (line 201) God the Father is referred to as Archesilas, but most remarkable of all is the name given to Christ in the refrain which runs through this speech: *Vivimus eternum meritis et numine Codri*. The self-sacrificing pagan king of

Athens has become Christ the saviour. Something of that Christian reinterpretation of the name and death of Codrus can be read in Marullus's address to his Greek contemporaries. Calling them *Codri* progenies is a subtle acknowledgement that in spite of the pagan dress in which the hymn is clothed, those whom it address are Christians.<sup>8</sup>

David R. Slavitt grants us the hermeneutical key to track down the particular fount of inspiration to those allegorical verses: «You will have already concluded that Archesilas is God, but may be happy to know that the word in Greek means “ruler”». <sup>9</sup> Having transcribed the greek “K” (*kappa*) as the latin equivalent to the Greek “X” (*khi*), i.e.: “CH”, Boccaccio has read “APXÉ” (*Beginning, Foundation, Rule*), instead of “APKE”, from “ARKEIN”, *to assist, to be of assistance*. According to the byzantine commentator of Homer's two major epic poems, namely, Eustathius of Thessalonica, “Arkesilaos” is said of «the one who brings assistance to folks», since the coming auxilium is near, and because of the proportion of the two words, being the *iota* between them» (264, 30).<sup>10</sup> Having mainly opposed to Stocism, Arcesilaus could have quoted Hermias' last message to Aristotle, saying: «*Tell my friends and companions that I have done nothing weak or unworthy of philosophy*».

Paradoxically enough, Francesco Petrarca evokes the Middle Academy scepticism as we can be learned of by means of these verses of him:

*The aged Hippias, who dare to say:  
«I know all things; and then, certain of naught,  
Archesilaus, doubtful of everything».*

*(Vidd'Ippia il vecchiarel, che già fu oso,  
Dir'io so tutto, e poi di nulla certo,  
Ma d'ogni cosa Archesilao dubbioso [Le rime, III.79-80]).*

Hippias, an exemplary sophist, and Archesilaos, the seventh director of the Academy, do constitute, both of them, an *oxymoron*.<sup>11</sup> This one is a remembrance of some *coincidentia oppositorum*. As Nicholas of Cusa's God-Head. Eternity and Time are a couple of extremes reconciled by the *Triumph of Arkesilaos' Kairós*<sup>12</sup>: «*Trionfo del Tempo*». <sup>13</sup>

In another Petrarca's writing, Arcesilas' philosophy has been summarized according to Cicero's ultimate epitome<sup>14</sup>, namely: Arcesilas' philosophy has been more radical than Socrates' irony:

*Socrates ait: «Hoc unum scio, quod nichil scio». Quam humillimam ignorantiae professionem ceu nimis audacem reprehendit Archesilas, ne id unum sciri asserens, nichil sciri. En gloriosa philosophia, que vel ignorantiam profitetur, vel ignorantiae saltem notitiam interdicit! Circulatio anceps! Ludus inextricabilis!» (De suis ipsius et multorum ignorantia, VI.148 [Socrates says: «I know one thing: that I know nothing». Arcesilaus criticizes this humble admission of ignorance as too bold, and says that we cannot even know that we know nothing. What a glorious philosophy! It either confesses its own ignorance or forbids us to know our ignorance. O vicious circle! O inextricable riddle! {On His Own Ignorance, 6.148}}).*<sup>15</sup>

Socrates' *dictum de docta ignorantia* saying: «Hoc unum scio, quod nihil scio», is meant to be interpreted in twofold interrelating ways: Firstly: As a conscious and deliberated dissimulation of ignorance. As Aristotles said of Plato's Teacher: «Mock-modest people, who understate things, seem more attractive in character; for they are thought to speak not for gain but to avoid parade; and here too it is qualities which bring reputation that they disclaim, as Socrates used to do» (*Nic. Eth.*, 4.7.23-25).<sup>16</sup> Secondly: What Socrates seriously doesn't indeed know by means of the *Lógos* is what could be our soteriological and escatological condition and destiny. For this crucial and vital issue, Socrates always appeals to reasonable beliefs in some Greek Myths on *post-mortem* human existences (Plato's *Apology of Socrates* last plea). What Arcesilaus really did ultimately, having discarded the socratic dissimulation, was substituting it

with the *disputatio utramque partem*, and he also embraced Socrates' final statement as his own theological and philosophical conviction, namely: «Now the hour to part has come. I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god» (42).<sup>17</sup> What Greek God? Zeus? Apollo? Hermes? Hades? Or Xenophanes' God? Anaxagoras' God? Socrates' *tò daimónion*? Most probably, not a Greek folk's God, but a Philosophical God-Head. A *Coincidentia Oppositorum* in rebus, whose cognote counterpart is a *Docta Ignorantia* in mentibus.

As J. Hankins says: «*Carneades and Archesilas, as Ficino correctly understand, had scepticorum more seen Plato as a philosopher who asserted nothing dogmatically*».<sup>18</sup> In Michael J. B. Allen's translation the aforementioned lines read as follows:

But the four academies older than those [of Plotinus and Proclus] differed from them while agreeing among themselves in supposing the writings of Plato entirely poetic. But they mutually disagreed in that Carneades was of the opinion that Plato, in the manner of the Sceptics, had thought and treated of all things as being doubtful, and had not come to any decision on any issue; whereas Archesilas supposed that Plato held nothing for certain but only what was verisimilar or probable.<sup>19</sup> (*Academmiæ vero quatuor iis antiquiores in hoc ab iis discrepabant inter se congruentes, quod scripta Platonis omnino poetica esse arbitrabantur. Sed inter se differebant, quod Carneades Platonem et putavisse et tractavisse omnia opinabatur Scepticorum more velut ambigua, neque ullum in rebus ullis habuisse delectum. Archesilas autem certum quidem nihil habuisse Platonem, verisimile tamen aliquid et probabile*).<sup>20</sup>

Necessarily scepticism is not at variance with theism; in the History of Greek Philosophy, there has been varieties of scepticism trends. For instance, the cynic Theodorus of Cirene was so a radical atheist, that he gained the nickname «The Atheist», and he was put to death (Athenaeus: *The Deipnosophists*, 13.92.611). But according to Numenius of Apamea, some Theodorus' disciples were opposed to Arcesilaus.<sup>21</sup> We might guess that one point of disagreement with him would have

been his platonic theism. In addition, Lucian of Samosata composed a *Life of Demonax*, in which he talks about a cynic who emphasized his philosophical principles by wearing a bear's skin and he insisted on not to be addressed by his own name, Honoratus, but as Arcesilaus ("Bear" [19]).<sup>22</sup> Two cynic extremes: Theodorus and some of his disciples, opposed to Arcesilaus; Honoratus, a would-be admirer of Arcesilaus.

There is no blatant contradiction between Arcesilas's neo-socratic trend to Plato's Writings, with either irony-mayeutics or aporetic-dialectics<sup>23</sup>, and, therefore, not even for instance, to Proclus' *Platonic Theology*<sup>24</sup>, because, –as Epiphanius has recorded for us–, *Arcesilaus said that the truth is accessible to God alone, but not to man, and Carneades was of the same opinion as Arcesilaus*. Mankind's inheritance consists on searching for Truth through the plausible verisimilitude (*tò eulogon; tò pithanon*), and this one always implies Truth essence and existence. We may epitomate the bottomless abyss for the ultimate *Epokhé* as, –in S. T. Coleridge's paraphrasis of Cicero' definition–, a "*willing suspension of all disbelief*" (*Biographia Literaria*, chapter XIV).

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas WRIGHT: *Biographia Britannica Literaria; or Biography of Literary Characters of Great Britain and Ireland, arranged in chronological order. Anglo-Norman Period*. London, John W. Parker, West Strand, 1846, p. 35. Cf. *Anglo-Latin Satirical Poets and Epigrammatists of the Twelfth Century. Volum 2: The Minor Anglo-Latin Satirists and Epigrammatists*. Ed. by Thomas Wright. Cambridge Library Collection, 2012, p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Books II and III (Sects 47-80, De Fide)*, trans. by Frank Williams, Leiden; New York; Köln: E. J. Brill, 1994, p. 649. «According to Epiphanius –not the most trustworthy witness– Arcesilaus said that "truth is accessible only to god and not to man". Does this reflect a tradition that Arcesilaus said something analogous to Socrates' disparaging contrast in the *Apology* (23b) between the worthlessness of human wisdom and the wisdom of god?» (A. A. Long: *Socrates in Hellenistic Philosophy, in Stoic Studies*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 14).

<sup>3</sup> *Ante-Nicene Fathers. Christian Library. Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Ed. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Vol XI: *The Writings of Tertullian*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 38, George Steet, 1869, vol. I, p. 467.

<sup>4</sup> *Qvinti Septimi Florentis Tertvlliani Opera*, Tvrnholti Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii, 1954, p. 43.

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<sup>5</sup> «Debut ergo Arcesilas. Arcesilas, teste Mela, nihil affirmatis Academiae antistes, ita omnem rerum scientiam ex hominibus sustulit, ut eam soli Deo reliquerit; ut Epiphanius de eo scribit tom. II, lib. III, de Hæresibus. Betuleius» (*Lucii Cæcili Firmiani Lactantii Opera omnia. Patrologia Latina*, vol. 6, p. 359, n.).

<sup>6</sup> Boccaccio's *Olympia*, trans. by I. GOLLANZ, at the Florence Press, London, 1913, p. 35. In another poem of Boccaccio, we can read the following verses:

LYCIDAS

151 Doryle, ne facias; nequicquam tangere Olympum  
152 jam precibus posses aut irrevocabile fatum.  
153 Actum est de me deque illis quos justus in Orcum  
154 Archesilas misit quondam. Nunc desine quorsum  
155 contendo veniam et reliquos tibi carmine signem

(*Bucolica Carmina*, "Vallis Opaca"

[[http://carmina-latina.com/cariboost\\_files/BOCC\\_BUC\\_TWD.txt](http://carmina-latina.com/cariboost_files/BOCC_BUC_TWD.txt) {Tuesday, April 8, 2014}]).

<sup>7</sup> *L'oltrettomba classico medievale dantesco nel Rinascimento. Parte prima, Italia, secoli XIV e XV*, University of Michigan Library, 1922, p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> *Reading Horace in the Quattrocento: The Hymn to Mars of Michael Marullus*, in *Homage to Horace. A Bimillanary Celebration*, ed. by S. J. Harrison, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1995, p. 340.

<sup>9</sup> Giovanni BOCCACCIO: *The Latin Eclogues*, trans. by David R. Slavitt, The John Hopkins University Press, 2010, p. 124.

<sup>10</sup> *Index in Eustathi Commentarios in Homeri Iliadem et Odysseam*. Studio Matthei Devarii ad fidem exempli romani correctior editus. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1960, p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> «Nè Archesilao, nè de stoici il Padre  
Sin qui gli han tolto via del cuor la Nebbia,  
She penetrar non lascia, ove sia 'l Spirto  
Muotor di ciò, che muove, mastro e Guida,  
Però van ciechi e bassi, e solo al Sole  
Molti dricciar altari e a le Stelle»

(Teofilo FOLENGO [1491-1544]: *Caos del Triperuno* [1527] {*Chaos of Triperuno*} <http://www.folegno.com/Total%20Chaos%20July%202022%202013.pdf> [19-02-2014], p. 190): «Neither Archesilaos, nor the father of Stoics have up until now taken the Fog away from the heart, which does not allow [itself] to be penetrated, wherever the Spirit may be a mover of that which moves, master and Guide, however they go blind and lowly, and many raised altars only to the Sun and to the stars»

(<http://www.folegno.com/Total%20Chaos%20July%202022%202013.pdf> [19-02-2014], p. 190).



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<sup>12</sup> «Post Kalendas autem reperimus multis modis tempus dividi in aevum (aeternitatem), in tempus, in tempestatem, in annum. Aevum igitur est infinita quaedam corporum (s. globorum) coelestium circuitus, sive ipsius universi coeli perfecta circulatio, tempus autem infinitus ex aevo progressus. Itaque etiam *Krónos* (id est, Saturnus) Urani (i.e. Coeli) filius vocatur; tempus enim (*khronos*) ex coeli motibus prodit: ut tempestas temporis species sit, neque ipsum tempus» (*Joannis Laurentii Philadelpheni Lydi De mensibus*, 3.11 [pp. 110-111]). According to Evanhélos A. Moutsopoulos: «Es suficiente señalar que la “kairicidad” es el carácter ontológico (o epistemológico, según el caso) de un estado que resulta de la existencia de una diferencia de potencial entre anterioridad y posterioridad, reducida a un *minimum* que se presenta como un *optimum*, como un instante privilegiado que expresa la anticipación de un dato posible actualizado en un presente vivido situado fuera del presente temporal, y en el cual el “kairós”, situado en la intersección de las categorías del *pas-encore* y del *jamais-plus*, es testimonio intencional» (*Finalidad y dimensiones “kairicas” de la estructura del ser* (in the *Anuario filosófico*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1990, pp. 121-122). Moutsopoulos' conceit of *Kairós'* entanglements in Greek Philosophy History and in its subsidiaries in Western Philosophy History, adds lifelike dynamism and axiological values to the temporality dimension which has overcome and permeated our common sense by the triumph of the classical positive sciences and their technologies.

<sup>13</sup> «Note: Archesilaos (c. 315 BCE-c. 240), teacher at the Middle Platonic Academy, introduced a new phase in skeptic thought (see *Universal Encyclopedia of Philosophers* online, entry by Zbigniew Pańpuch); called “Archesilao dubbioso” by Petrarch, *Trionfo del Tempo*, cap 3» (<http://www.folengo.com/Total%20Chaos%20July%202022%202013.pdf> [19-02-2014], p. 190, ft. 40).

<sup>14</sup> «Itaque Arcesilas negabat esse quicquam quod sciri posset, ne illud quidem ipsum, quod Socrates sibi reliquisset: sic omnia latere censebat in occulto: neque esse quicquam quod cerni aut intellegi posset: quibus de causis nihil oportere neque profiteri neque adfirmare quemquam neque adensione approbare, cohibereque semper et ab omni lapsu continere temeritatem, quae tum esset insignis, cum aut falsa aut incognita res approbaretur, neque hoc quicquam esse turpius quam cognitioni et perceptioni adensionem approbationemque praecurrere» (*M. Tullii Ciceronis Academicorum Posteriorum*. Liber Primus, 12.45).

<sup>15</sup> Francesco PETRARCA: *Invectives*. Ed. & trans. by David Marsh. The I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, 2003, vol. 11, pp. 352-353.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle: *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by David Ross, Oxford Word's Classics, 2009, p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> Plato: *Apology*, trans. by G. M. A. Grube, in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: from Thales to Aristotle*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2nd ed.: 2000, p. 130.

<sup>18</sup> Marsilio Ficino on *Reminiscentia and the Transmigration of Souls*. *Rinascimento* [Internet]. 2006; 45:3-17

([http://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/2961227/Hankins\\_MarsilioFicino.pdf?sequence=4](http://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/2961227/Hankins_MarsilioFicino.pdf?sequence=4); cf. <http://scholar.harvard.edu/jameshankins/publications/marsilio-ficino-reminiscentia-and-transmigration-souls> [21 March 2014]).

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<sup>19</sup> Marsilio FICINO: *Platonic Theology. Books XVII-XVIII*, trans. by Michael J. B. Allen and ed. by James Hankins and William Bowen, The I Tatti Renaissance Library 23, 2006, vol. 6, 17-18, p. 45.

<sup>20</sup> *Platonic Theology. Books XVII-XVIII*, vol. 6, p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> «Mnaseas at least, and Philomelus, and Timon, the Sceptics, call him a Sceptic, as they were themselves, because he also overthrew truth and falsehood and probability. Therefore, although on account of his Pyrrhonic doctrines he might have been called a Pyrrhonist, yet from respect for his lover he submitted to be still called an Academic. He was therefore a Pyrrhonist, except in name: but an Academic he was not, except in being so called. For I do not believe what Diocles of Cnidos asserts in his *Diatribae* so-entitled, that through fear of the followers of Theodorus, and of the Sophist Bion, who used to assail the philosophers, and shrank from no means of refuting them, Arcesilaus took precautions, in order to avoid trouble, by never appearing to suggest any dogma, but used to put forward the “suspense of judgement” as a protection, like the black juice which the cuttle-fishes throw out. This then I do not believe» (14.5

[Eusebius of Caesarea: *Praeparatio Evangelica {Preparation for the Gospel}*. Trans. by E. H. Gifford (1903). Book 14} [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius\\_pe\\_14\\_book14.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius_pe_14_book14.htm) Friday, March 21, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> «Honoratus (RE 10). Second century A.D. This Cynic philosophized dressed in a bearskin (*arktos*). This is why Demonax (Lucian, *Demonax* 19) called him Arcesilaus (*Arkesilaos*) rather than Honoratus. Cf. RE 8.2 (1913) col. 2276 (von Arnim); *PIR2H* 195» (*The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, ed. by Robert Bracht Branham, Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, University of California Press, 1996, p. 396). «19. Il y avait un philosophe cynique, qui était vêtu d'une peau d'ours: Démonax ne voulait pas qu'on l'appelât Honoratus, ce qui était son vrai nom, mais Arctésilas» (Lucien. XXXVII. *Démonax* [<http://remacle.org/bloodwolf/philosophes/Lucien/demonax.htm>] {Friday, March 21, 2014}).

<sup>23</sup> «So it must have come to seem necessary to Arcesilaus to take quite another tack if he was to maintain a *raison d'être* for the Platonic school; and that turned out to be a radical change of direction. What Arcesilaus in fact did was to turn back to the Socratic, aporetic strand in the Platonic tradition, drawing primarily on the early Socratic dialogues and, no doubt, such a document as the *Theatetus*, with a view to developing a position of scepticism, or withholding of assent to impressions (*epoché*). This involved a robust denial of the existence of any such impressions as the Stoics claimed to be “kataleptic”, that is, such as would guarantee certainty» (John M. DILLON: *Saving Plato: Ficino on Plato's Doctrine of the Soul's Eternity and Reincarnation in context*, p. 3. [1<sup>a</sup> bozza oil 25-9-2012 {[https://www.academia.edu/5414184/Ficino\\_Saving\\_Plato](https://www.academia.edu/5414184/Ficino_Saving_Plato)] Friday, March 21, 2014}).

<sup>24</sup> According to Moutsopoulos: «The work of art, thus, becomes a “kairic” opportunity and, in its turn, a starting point for such an ascent. This is valid not only for the visual arts but also for dramaturgy, poetry in general and music as well, in spite of Plato's reticence (*in Rempublicam*, I, 50, 29-51, 5 Kroll)». Moutsopoulos summarizes stating that: «Measure and kairós are essential criteria of successful imitation» (*Artistic Mimesis according to Proclus*, in his *Philosophical Suggestions*, Academy of Athens, Research Center on Greek Philosophy, 2013, p. 95).