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Socrates' Apology and Plato's Poetry: A Speculative Exegesis

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“Poetry makes nothing happen”

—W. H. Auden¹

Everybody knows that Socrates and Plato hated the poets. This is distressing enough but a literal reader of Plato's *Republic* could conclude that the truth is even worse. Socrates seemingly seeks to banish the toxic power of poetry from his ideal city. If humans were to be good and happy, they had to be saved from contact with reality and fed on what Plato shamelessly called noble lies by a proto-totalitarian regime.

This canard or some version of it has been leveled against Plato for three millennia. It is the basis for a grand coalition of anti-Platonists that unites the last pre-Socratic Aristotle (its originator) with positivists and materialists on the left and religious thinkers on the right. While atheists on the left despise Plato's idealism, the religious right attacks him for offering souls salvation outside their Law, Church, or Umma.

While these matters clearly deserve to be addressed at far greater length than that afforded to this article, it is possible to show here and now, with close and constant reference to the *Apology*, that Socrates' so-called quarrel or disagreement with the poets actually has to do with matters that have far more to do with the misuse and afterlife of poetry than with poetry itself. Only after this is it possible to turn to the *Republic* and see why Plato's Socrates spoke as he did to impressionable Glaucon.²

But before closely reading relevant parts of his *Apology* to find Socrates' true views on the place of poetry, we must know what he had in mind when he spoke of poetry. Only then can we distinguish between (a) the poetic reality of Classical Athens that Socrates' dialectic and Plato's poetry sought to deconstruct, (b) the medieval union of elements from Aristotle's technical account of poetry and Augustine's intensely anti-political theology, and (c) today's solipsistic poetry and

its celebration of the lack or loss of meaning. This article only studies the first of these closely related topics. Its approach is as playfully speculative as the philosophic poetry it defends.

As we turn to the *Apology* it should first be noted that it is the only work that Plato stands behind himself. It thus seems to provide the best evidence of what Socrates and Plato truly believed; no other dialogue includes Plato in its *dramatis personae*. Indeed in the *Phaedo*, often seen as the founding text of Platonism, its author even explicitly states that he was absent due to illness (*Phaedo* 59b). But just as Plato was one of those who offered to pay Socrates' fine and guaranteed his continued literary immortality (*Apology* 38b), so too does he seem to vouch for the accuracy of his rendering of Socrates' *Apology* or defense speech. But this dialogue is not merely a certifiably true account of the trial; despite its seeming monologue-like form, it is actually a dramatic conversation between Socrates and a 500-man chorus of jurors standing for the city.

In other words, in a way both like and unlike all of the other dialogues, which seem to describe the education of a certain soul in a unique context by a Socrates made both young and beautiful by Plato's art (*Second Letter* 314c), and thus represent an ordeal or process of learning for one specific psychic regime, the *Apology* tells how an old and ugly Socrates confronted Athens itself and forced the city to see its diseased soul. Socrates controversially claimed to be the only living practitioner of the true political art (*Gorgias* 521d). The *Apology* will show him wash off the poet-painted beauty of the great city and condemn its splendid vices. I will try to show how reading Plato's *Apology of Socrates* as a dialogue between political poetry and philosophy sheds much needed light on the essence of both activities.

Furies and Judges

By calling his judges "men of Athens" (*Apology* 17a) Socrates implies that their identity is formed not by their sworn role as individual jurors but by a de-forming prior influence they are all but helpless to withstand. He is trying to turn this angry, mindless swarm into specific souls capable of using Athena's gifts. In contrast to them, Socrates, whose name means something like "great enduring power," is more puzzled than possessed by this force, the persuasive rhetoric that his enemies have deployed against him. Yet, as we shall see, this very invulnerability to rhetoric will be seen as added evidence of his vicious estrangement from the city and its regnant pieties. While Socrates explicitly detaches himself from the litigious, fury-ridden mindset Aristophanes describes so well in his *Wasps*, his enemies and the vast majority of his jurors cannot separate their city from

these chthonic powers that play a centripetal role in its quest for justice. As the poet Aeschylus foresaw, the darker energies beneath the city were best projected beyond it by foreign wars (*Eumenides* 1006–9); once Athens was stripped of its ships, walls, and military resources, its Furies would return to divide the city against itself. Socrates is like Orestes in his tragic attempt to force these Furies to stand before the bar of reason.

By trying to expel these sacred powers from a hidden cave under the cave, Socrates threatens to unmake the foundations of the city and expose its fury-ruled poetry. This is the truest reason behind the charge of corruption made against him. While Plato speculated on this theme in the *Euthyphro*,³ the words and acts of Socrates in the *Apology* give the best vantage on his views on the use and abuse of poetry.

When Socrates defends himself against the charge of corrupting the youth, the main basis for his defense consists in saying that his jury, and by extension Athens itself, is already corrupted (*Apology* 18b, 19e). He now seeks to reverse the effects of this prior corruption; this is rather like the procedure described in the *Statesman* where Zeus reverses the motion of the cosmos (*Statesman* 269c ff.) although the effects will only be felt in a glorified Athens created posthumously by Plato. But if Socrates is correct, how and why were the citizens of Athens corrupted? He seems to answer this by making explicit the earlier unwritten charges already made against him, most notably by Aristophanes (*Clouds* 225f; *Apology* 18c). Socrates exposes the basis for this fury against him by accusing himself, in the name of these Furies, of making the weaker argument stronger and investigating matters above the heavens and beneath the earth (*Apology* 19 b–c).

The procedure Socrates uses here is very much akin to the one he follows in his dialogues with single interlocutors. Once the origins of their implicit wisdom is brought out of the cave into daylight, these now apparent weaknesses may be critically examined and duly refuted. The only difference has to do with the great size of his jury. Since he cannot interrogate them all individually, Socrates himself must speak on their behalf. The jurors' rare silence here may be taken as tacit acceptance that Socrates framed these charges against himself fairly.

Weak and Strong Arguments

But these charges reveal much more about them than his accusers would otherwise have known or been willing to concede. We are forced to ask on what deeper basis arguments are deemed to be weak or strong; further, this talk of matters above the heavens and beneath the earth suggests that these sensory limits of earth and sky do not pertain to the ultimate truth about things, since there are matters below and above them. These limits are thus, in the most profound sense, artificial. Indeed, Socrates is having us question the identity and motives of the artisans who built the categories of reality in which we live, dwell, and have our being. Just as he cannot be forced to use the righteous, paranoid, and adversarial language of the Athenian law courts, and so reveals the artificial or conventional nature of that element, Socrates is both acting out the very crimes he has accused himself of committing and also bringing the criminality of these actions into question. It is fair to say that he is also exposing the weakness of the strong (in the sense of persuasive) arguments that his accusers, both old and new, have made against him; beyond the heated atmosphere of the law court these claims seem absurd or at least unworthy of serious attention.

The absurdity of the language-game played by the litigious Athenians is exposed by Socrates' refusal to play along with them; the seeming necessity of succumbing to the divinized powers of rage and strife is refuted existentially by his conduct. Yet this refutation only increases the anger of his foes. By his coolness under fire he is bringing their own conduct into discredit and also implying that their pride in their traditions and institutions is unfounded. By thinking for himself and living a good life beyond the limits set by the city, he reveals much about philosophy, politics, and even human nature itself. By his ability to question the gods of the city, Socrates shows Athens that these holy origins are not truly divine but mere "clouds" of hot air, just used to impress and awe the demos. If not, he could not have flown above them.

Once we come to see that the strength of a strong argument comes from its ability to persuade the ignorant many, rather than from any accurate correspondence to the truth itself, we may justly conclude that neither the power of the many or the oily persuasiveness of priests or politicians is sufficient to make an argument into what Thucydides once called "a possession for all times" (1.22). The stark inability of Pericles' "School of Athens" (2.41) to educate the wily Persians or persuade the stubborn Spartans showed the ultimate if unwelcome and ugly truth of Socrates' words. Although he was called meddlesome and evil, if we are to believe his accusations against himself, something itself thought impossible in the ultra-agonistic atmosphere of the law court,

Socrates will say that he did little more than use ordinary language where he was expected to emulate the fulsome flattery and ornate speech of the politicians and priests.

By this refusal to emulate the ways of a sophist or huckster, Socrates is showing Athens that his life is based on simple speech and thought (*Apology* 17c–18a); even if he was unable to make the Athenians follow him, his words and deeds show them that another way of virtuous life, one independent of mimetic morals and religious superstition, was possible. While his self-evident happiness proved that he was not hated by the gods, Socrates' poverty, humble origins, and ugliness only compounded the scandal by proving that his virtue could be emulated by anyone; simply put, there was no need for one to gain money or power to lead a good life. While many Athenians were persuaded by a composite of the fear of death and religious superstition about the afterlife to obey the many and their leaders, Socrates showed by his example that a virtuous man did not have to fear death. This is why he is still a threat today to tyrants and theocrats alike.

The Gods of Athens

Although, on the basis of the evidence we have seen so far, it would be very easy to conclude that Socrates was an enlightened atheist who saw through the foolish superstitions of his culture but failed to see that Athenian society was incapable of sustaining itself once all fear of the gods was removed, we discover that Socrates is indeed a religious man. Even though he claims to be devout in a very different way from that of the many (*Apology* 35d), Socrates says explicitly that his life and semi-public civic mission was done in obedience to Apollo's oracle at Delphi (*Apology* 30a, 33c). The parallel with the tragic hero Orestes is striking; like him, Socrates takes on false old gods and seeks to purge his city of corruption, even at the cost of death. We shall explore how the *Apology* may be used to establish a new kind of relationship between the divine and human: one that neither manipulates gods nor stifles human freedom and virtue. Far from being opposed to philosophy, truly inspired poetry is both essential and complementary to what a real philosopher does. If the origins of poetry are inspired by love, then its visions cannot be regained by rite or method.

We should first ask about the matters above heaven and below earth Socrates was accused of questioning; whose picture of earth and sky did he seem to reject? Here the answer seems quite obvious; as the *Euthyphro* indicates, the poems of Homer and Hesiod are seen as giving accurate accounts of these matters (*Euthyphro* 6b–c). Even if the Olympians, the powers behind heaven and

earth, are not visible, common sense says that the poets show us just how the supernatural realm is ordered and what pious behavior towards the gods is. The poets Socrates criticizes were not the pathetic private pen-pushers they are today; they were primarily paid performers or priests, producers of political propaganda for a predominantly preliterate public.

Many poets would certainly have agreed with the Biblical claim that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 9.10); they preferred to believe that the gods were just as capricious and cruel as the *Iliad* depicted them. Odysseus' lies are forgotten. Hesiod bluntly said that the jealous gods "kept livelihood hidden from men" (*Works and Days* 42). He warns us that, "only fools defy the stronger for they suffer both defeat and humiliation" (*Works and Days* 210–11). This pessimistic mindset survived the awful Peloponnesian War. Thucydides tells us how the general Nicias, "least deserving of his fate" despite or perhaps because of his obsessive piety, met with defeat, death, and total disgrace along with his massive Athenian army at Syracuse (7.86); in a like manner, a few years earlier, the defeated Melians were cold-bloodedly told by the Athenians before being slaughtered that "the strong do whatever they can and the weak suffer what they must" (5.89). Thus harshness actually saves the weak from the cruel delusion of hope.

Poetry as Political Theology

In other words, both ancient poets and recent historians seemed to tell the newly emancipated citizenry of Athens that they were still ruled by fierce and irresistible passions (whether gods, god-sent, or neither) that could or should not be curbed by reason. Even if the gods were distant, as they seemed to be after the Peloponnesian War, men had to submit to time-honored conventions interpreted by their betters. These were the poems, the sacred wisdom binding the Athenians to their past and their traditions. The terrible results of the last generation's hubris prejudiced them against free thinkers who sought to defy or escape these bonds.

In a sense, both the Democrats and Oligarchs agreed that collective experience, whether based on popular majorities or pious tradition, was better than individual rational thought. As we shall see, Socrates offended both groups by claiming that the gods themselves supported his efforts to question the wisdom of those who ruled the city. While the Democrats held that the people's voice was supreme and resented Socrates' appeal to a higher authority than their sovereign will, the traditionalists were scandalized by his re-reading of Homer or Hesiod in ways that belittled their own wisdom. Only Socrates could have made Herod and Pilate friends. Yet in doing so he exposed

deep, embarrassing affinities between old enemies that increased their anger at him. He thus set the stage for a new tragedy and the new kind of poetry Plato would write.

We have suggested that the poets set up a world-view, cultural horizons explaining the Axial Age to the newly emancipated Athenians of the Classical Age. Just as our own culture claims to be rooted in Judeo-Christian-Roman tradition, and chooses to ignore its debts to the Classical Greeks, the Athenians used Homer and Hesiod in such a way that would emphasize their autochthony and exceptionalism. Despite the embarrassing fact that Homer's epics all but ignore Athens, his minimal references to the city only serving to underline its insignificant contribution to the Trojan War, sixth-century Athens was where the Homeric texts were definitively codified. Further, in a way resembling that by which Vergil's *Aeneid* would link Troy's destiny to Rome, Aeschylus' stately Orestes trilogy claims that Athens' law and jurors would resolve the massive political issues raised by the Trojan War and its aftermath. It may be the case that the Book of Mormon did something similar with the Bible in using the Puritans' veneration for the book as the basis for a pseudo-historical tale linking Jesus Christ and America. Thus, straight Roman roads replace the stormy seas of Greek poetry and philosophy.

This way of turning indubitable cultural debts into false facts created a tale of predestined and "manifest destiny" where inspired poetic genius is seen as insufficient basis to justify a divinized text's authority. So, instead of a god who casts his bread upon the waters, or the sun which shines on both the just and the wicked, we have an arbitrary god who plays favorites and is partisan to the point of being the origin of an irrational faith of voluntarism. Yet the sheer certainty of these crude beliefs is used to logically deduce systems from them.

While we now are almost ready to understand how the words of an inspired poet may be used and abused to form the dogmatic basis for a culture, in a way that often rides roughshod over his own intentions, the plot has not yet thickened sufficiently. Can a poet be divinely wise? Can he be entrusted with the blueprints of God's plans? How does his divine or poetic foreknowledge affect the meaning of the lives of those less-favored mortals? Is his very poetic gift unbecoming evidence of divine caprice and unfairness? But, on the other hand, if we disallow his right to these gifts on the basis of inequity, what would the content of now inscrutable divine wisdom amount to? While we see how democracy is based on belief in the freedom and equality of all, and presupposes the unfairness and impossibility of a preordained divine plan, could the lack of evidence for such a

plan, and a resultant belief in benign divine indifference, only justify the power of the strong or persuasive over the weak?

Theology as Democratic Poetry

How did Athens both believe in unfair gods and also affirm the ideas of equality and freedom that are essential to democracy? Isn't the very thinking about these vexing problems or even asking questions about them subversive? One of the main goals of tragedy or Hesiod was to teach the lowly not to envy those in places of authority. An Oedipus or an Orestes had to struggle continually with impossible problems that made them envy the simple piety and mindless security only the lowly could enjoy.

A king or poet must stand between the founding epics of a society and its quotidian realities. He must make these timeless works relevant to a particular place and time. Meanwhile the common people get to participate in the Collective Unconscious of their culture. Serving like Hades (literally *a-ides*/"no idea") as a "Plutonic" treasury of legends and stories held in common by a people,⁴ it gave both personal forgetfulness and a thoughtless shared community to those who drank of its Lethe-like waters. While Aristotle explains in his *Nicomachean Ethics* how pleasure and pain felt in the mind as honor and shame could usually override bodily sensations if habituation and good role models were used to make men see through the eyes of their city, it cannot be forgotten that this idea, first ironically described in the notorious *Republic* and then made into mimetic method by Aristotle, had already been used by Athens' poets and playwrights to unify the city and link its citizenry with their mythic past.

Unlike "information" about traditional ways of virtue, which cannot not be retained over time, is hard to rationally justify, and usually unable to master the passions, the performances of rhapsodes and dramatists were remarkably successful in imparting this emotional knowledge and unifying large numbers of people in a way that was both pleasurable and persuasive. This power over the emotions has often been seen as the basis for the so-called quarrel between philosophy and poetry; the rationally stronger argument of the philosopher proves to be existentially the weaker through its inability to command the human emotions, desires, and will. These very parts of man are used successfully by the poets to unify large bodies of men and build cities.

The full extent and power of Greek tragedy can only be imagined today since we no longer have the music and costumes that completed the collective experience of the gods Dionysus

enjoyed in the Classical Athens. What is today a cerebral Apollonian experience was both contaminated and consummated by the sensory element felt collectively with an orgiastic intensity that may only be seen today at international soccer games or college football. Furthermore, since tragedy combined both religion and mass entertainment, even the dyadic opposition between order and disorder was temporarily dissolved. Just as the serene marble statues and edifices of Athens were originally painted gaudily and meant to appeal to all, albeit in different ways, the poets unified psychic and social elements in a way that made one out of many.

Corruption and the Cave

We are now in a position to understand the most important charge against Socrates: the allegation that he corrupted the youth of Athens. The Greek word used here is *diaptheirein*, literally “destroy, ruin, cripple, weaken, slacken or dissipate.” In this context it is clear that Socrates is accused of weakening the strong, albeit irrational civic bonds formed by the poets. It is also striking and more than a little significant that Plato, who was not present, uses a negation of the same word to depict Socrates' calm demeanor at the moment of his death (*Phaedo* 117b). This suggests to us that while Socrates' character was unaffected by the imminent prospect of his bodily disintegration, his enemies accused him of corrupting the youth by separating them from the collective consciousness they formed through their art. We must recall that since the Greek word *poietes* literally means “maker” or “creator” the only difference between the poets and other artisans is that they “make” culture rather than objects.

While poetry makes nothing happen, as Auden saw, bad poets “make” many confused men into a “thing,” a collective body; filled with confidence in this artificial identity and false “nature,” those making up the many forget their identities as self-moving souls. Instead of leading virtuous lives using their innate powers for thought and wonder, they are manipulated to mindlessly identify with the mimetic morality of the city. Rather than seeing the beauty of the cosmos, they glut their souls on self-righteous anger, which, as Achilles saw, is sweeter than honey (*Iliad* 18.108–10). This is why the many swarm like Aristophanes' wasps against any threat to their insect-like existence; to create and keep their thoughtless unity, they wage endless wars; losing their minds, risking their lives and forgetting their souls for the sake of these artificial “happen”-ings. Socrates likened their leaders to pastry chefs who fed the demos unhealthy sweets (*Gorgias* 462d ff.) and

corrupted their wits. So, like bad poets, they “make” bad “things,” and worse make bad things “happen” for their profit.

In one of the *Republic*'s most vivid images, Socrates subtly likens a city ruled by a cadre of false guardians to Hades (*Republic* 514a ff.). He draws our minds to what occurs when men forget their souls and instead identify with their images as they are constructed by their manipulative rulers to be seen by others. Hinting that most men need not fear death since they already live as though they were in Hades, living as mere shades in an enslaved state where they literally have “no idea” of whom they are, Socrates seeks to rescue individuals from this state of voluntary servitude by asking questions that reveal the irrational and dangerous nature of the wisdom they have ingested from their state of false consciousness. Though a man saved from these illusions cannot ascend to a higher state of existence but still has to live with others who angrily reject the very idea that their core values and beliefs are false, thus risking the rescued man's life; he can now also see, and may even live and die for, a human potential for nobility that somehow overshadows the cave's illusions.

Socrates' life testifies that one can tend his soul well and lead a life of virtue even while living in the cave and lacking positive wisdom. This accounts for his absurd combination of ugliness and beauty. Despite his unattractive physical appearance and poverty, all qualities of the body, he was for some intangible reason found very attractive for what only could be explained as the invisible and powerful beauty of his soul. In this context, like Tiresias, he may be likened to the only man retaining his wits in Hades (*Odyssey* 10.492–95, *Meno* 100a). It was inevitable that he would be prosecuted by the cave's rulers, its poets, politicians and artisans, and accused of blasphemy against the city's gods. We now understand his reference to the futility of arguing with shadows (*Apology* 18d) although we may not yet see why he does so.

The Mission from God

Socrates' claim to be on a mission from God seems even more absurd when we hear that it was based on a response that his batty pal Chaerephon got from the Oracle at Delphi (*Apology* 20e–21a). When asked if anyone was wise than Socrates, the Oracle replied in the negative. It was Socrates who set out to prove the Oracle wrong and thus found the “true” value of human wisdom. As in many other cases involving the enigmatic words of Apollo's Oracle, the questioner's destiny only unfolded from his response to what was said at Delphi. We see *ex post facto* that the Pythia's

riddling words give the seeker inner self-knowledge rather than specific data about the future. It is as if one is expected to wrestle with the Oracle, as Jacob once did with the angel of the Lord (*Genesis* 32.24 ff.), and gain a new name and self-knowledge. The best Platonic parallel is the tale told by Diotima (*Symposium* 203b ff.). Socrates is likened by later speakers to a *daimon* moving between divine and human realms.⁵

For Socrates, the truth seems to be that the wisdom of God cannot be held by us and the divine realm cannot be represented with any adequacy in human categories; this makes Euthyphro's attempts to tie the gods down by rites or definitions that let men outwit or control them far more absurd than any claim Socrates made (*Euthyphro* 11b–d). It is better to read Homer as we do now for inspired insights into the human condition. Another interesting implication of this view is that we should not think of the gods in tyrannical terms; the *Odyssey* certainly suggests that we are of far more interest to the gods in our freedom and capacity for thought and virtue than if we were a pack of programmable playthings or just predestined puppets.

It seems also as if it is only with the greatest effort that we can think of the divine without using categories that are not deterministic; every generation must struggle to protect the New Testament from becoming the Old Testament. The children of Israel themselves had to struggle with the deep desire to leave Moses and return to their fleshpots and slavery in Egypt (Exodus 16.3). The Greeks faced a similar problem when dealing with the relation between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; despite the new dispensation offered by the later work, the temptation to prefer sexy Achilles to ugly Odysseus, and choose bloody glory to confession and civic reconciliation, resides deep in the fallen human soul. Even Odysseus himself at the very end of the great epic devoted to his rehabilitation, is poised to revert to his old violent self (*Odyssey* 24.537–9); this happens although the *Odyssey* itself seems to struggle against the reification of the tragic lessons of the *Iliad* and even shows how wily Odysseus must deconstruct his own myths if he is ever to return home to his wife, son and kingdom.

As we suggested earlier, divine powers cannot be made available to man without completely changing the natures of man and god. If power were distributed equally, then we would all be gods and if it were not, apart from being undemocratic, such inequity would be unfair and ultimately dangerous to one having divine favor. Even the *Iliad* subtly teaches us this sobering truth about the economy of the soul and the transitory nature of unearned happiness. Homer shows how godly Achilles, despite receiving every favor from Zeus, is yet driven by prideful rage to plot against his

own comrades and ends up betraying his lover and best friend. No man felt sharper sorrow, for Achilles knew full well that he had brought all of this evil on himself.

I have used these illustrations from Homer to show how Socrates and Plato would have read him in a way that would confound literal readers in their time and ours. Just as the Jews developed a sophisticated biblical hermeneutic system, one that would confound those who stole their texts without understanding how to wrestle with the words of a living god,⁶ Socrates and Plato seem to read the poets, especially Homer, in a way that would respect the inspired nature of the text and resist the temptation to go far too swiftly from a too-devout literal reading, that worships the very ink and letter of the book, to the other extreme of atheistic free-interpretation and promiscuous word-play that makes a text now mean all things for all people.

The Gifts of the Magi

Socrates, before concluding that his wisdom comes from awareness of his ignorance, interrogates three kinds of persons held to be wise. He first speaks to the politicians and finds that their wisdom or lack of it was inversely proportional to the opinion they and others held of it (*Apology* 22a). Thus, though politicians were well-skilled at persuading others that they were wise, a power that seems to come from persuading “the many” or *demos* to become one and follow their rule, they did not know how to use this power properly and only ended up believing their own lies. These rulers shamelessly define their rivals as “enemies of the city” in such a way that called civic virtues of the many are but the mindlessly imitated vices of the demagogues. As a result, both the corrupt Athenian citizens and their vicious rulers became fixated far more on hating their so-called foes than on tending to their own city or souls.

Since Socrates called himself the only living practitioner of true political art, he does not deny the possibility of true politics but states that the means usually used to persuade the many were as morally corrosive as they are ineffectual. He went on to claim in the *Gorgias* that while the sick and penurious are aware of their state, the corrupt lose the power to know that their own souls are diseased.⁷ While Socrates says that nobody deliberately corrupts those he lives with (*Apology* 25c–e), this corruption can be disguised as holy tradition or denied as a point of sacred honor. While the Spartans saw and deplored the restless motion that “diseased” the free Athenians, their own corruption resided in a stubborn refusal to admit change their ways or admit error. (Thucydides 1.70). Meanwhile, Athens’ demagogic politicians were unwise, and essentially atheistic to the

extent they did not think themselves divine. Like many conservative politicians today, they used religion to their own benefit. That they did so in complicity with many tragedians may be assumed, for even the best poets completely depended on political patronage to stage their plays.

The problem of poetry and politics becomes more interesting and complicated when Socrates then turns to the poets themselves. Unlike the politicians, who are pretty much dismissed as frauds, Socrates finds that the poets, though sometimes truly divinely inspired, were not at all wise (*Apology* 22b–c). Yet again we find an inverse relationship between the poets' wisest words and their ability to explain them but, unlike the politicians who can explain neither their manipulative art nor their own ignorance, because both disclosures would be shameful, the poets think themselves to be wise even though they are not the source of the divine wisdom that has come through them. As a result, the inspired words of poets were disregarded by them in favor of what was clever or politically expeditious. This inability to rightly apply winged words to human contexts, though once properly interpreted they can be of great value, suggests that just as the gods need human mouths to communicate with man, it is left up to others, barren but with a midwife's skill (*Theaetetus* 149a ff.), to explain the meaning of poets' words to us. Like midwives, they must explain words and uncover souls, while never claiming or asserting the right of a creator or maker.

While the tragic poets are but the means by which the gods are made emotionally present to the many, the harder task of dividing the truly inspired lines of the poets from their baser demagogic chaff and revealing the meaning of these divine insights into our humanity seems to be left to this other type. This is necessary since, while the gods can or will only interact indirectly with men via poets (*Symposium* 203a), poets prefer to pretend at being wise as they join with politicians to "make" caves. Here, like the dogs of the *Republic*, we learn to mistrust gods, love our masters, and hate strangers. The swineherd Eumaeus explains this pig-headed mindset, saying that the gods take away half of a man's wits the day he is enslaved (*Odyssey* 17.322). In the cave we give ourselves ample reason to obey but not enough to think freely.

Socrates finds the true basis for this toxic outlook when he meets the final group of men considered wise, the artisans. By this we mean men who make objects. While they resemble the poets in the sense that the poets view themselves as makers, their task normally involves the making of identical generic things that can be owned and used. Just as most Americans today cannot grasp the difference between a business run for profit and a college, country, or church, Socrates found that the artisans or makers believed that because they knew how to do or make one

thing perfectly, they knew everything (*Apology* 22d–e). It is as if they thought reality to consist of artifacts or things.

Just as the cave’s prisoners were entertained by spectacles and did not wish to be free in any real way, the Athenians were convinced by Pericles that their hubristic mix of poetry and statecraft “conquered sea and land and left imperishable reminders of their power” (Thucydides 2.41). This hints that Athens’ poet-politicians, from Solon and Pericles to Cleon or Anytus, felt that their citizens and even reality was “made” by the rough magic of persuasion. Next, well before God’s *ex nihilo* creation was believed in, the *polis* was abolished and all reality came to be seen as a system of subjugated objects ruled by the imperative voice of a god-emperor. Later Augustine, sometime imperial orator, scorns Socratic self-knowledge in the name and voice of a Creator who knows us better than we know ourselves.⁸ We have to choose between the soul’s freedom and its perfection *qua* divine artifact.

Rescuing the Soul

Socratic questions corrupted or corroded Athens’ golden age of imperial artisanship by forcing individual souls out of a toxic state of thing-hood. He tried to make them aware of an excellence that extended far beyond moving shadows in a cave. Instead of being seduced by the wish to emulate a powerful god imposing order upon a herd of thoughtless souls with enslaved bodies, an evil temptation exponentially increased by our technology, Socrates merely sought human wisdom and the virtues gained by renouncing divine ambitions and recovering honest speech (*Apology* 20d). His dialectical *via media*, which avoids both divine imperatival speech-acts and bestial ejaculations, better suits the soul’s fluid nature than the false rationality that hides behind Procrustean methods of ordering and categorization; it aims at seeing souls in all their singularity but also uses speech that assumes a shared human solidarity.

Post-human “things,” whether mobs or unschooled men, refuse self-knowledge in the name of craven new identities; they wear an armor of lies forged by bad poems and worse politics. Socrates recognizes neither himself in the speeches made about him nor anyone in the angry mob of armed citizens, instantly springing out of these false grounds and arrayed against him. Like a mob, a corrupt city cannot invest in self-knowledge regarding its origins. It prefers to emulate Achilles and live for an angry day or gaudy night since it is convinced that the soul is weak and the gods are evil. The danger of a corrupted city learning to love and fear as one demented leviathan is

based on the greater evil of morality being seen as an artifice created by so-called owners of intellectual virtues; wise men who exempt themselves from practicing the slave morality they impose on a credulous *hoi polloi* so that sheep may safely graze.

Despite the perennial temptation faced by poets to claim divine rather than human wisdom, and rule like Achilles as prince of the dead (Odysseus' lying and flattering words must be seen to be true in the sense that the desire to be Achilles animated the quick and the dead in both Homer's time and his own), poetry must refuse the desire to make or rule reality. Poets cannot exceed the limits of human ignorance and try to make things happen or claim knowledge of the whole without objectifying all they wish to know or rule over. True knowledge is not generic control over dead things. It is vulnerable awareness of many unique souls humbly beheld. Likewise, the power of life and death over many can never be equated with the true knowledge that comes from being alongside others. Humans must be pried from a common-sensed setting in generic *everybody*-ness; before a soul becomes *somebody* worth talking with or about, it must be shipwrecked and undergo Odysseus' experience of being *nobody*. For this to occur, poetry must open a soul up to the sorrow and fury hidden in its origins. Until then a man is but a thing or object, a slave trapped in a cave of its own *da-sein*, tyrannical and tyrannized, formed and ruled by powers it refuses to know or see. As Auden's winged words reveal, poetry helps make this no-thing or event of un-thing-ing happen; the soul is cast into a sea of forms and sees the excuses, lies, and errors that made its ego. But nihilism is not the end of a poem. True poetry is the midwife of wonder. It nurtures a soul's receptivity to all things.

Unlike clichéd anthems and slogans, true poetry plays a vital role in recalling us to the fullness of life. It may be joined with Socratic shock therapy in awakening the soul from its dogmatic slumbers, a paranoid state of consciousness spawned when the powers of poetry were misused in the cave to "make" thumotic answers out of erotic forms or questions, and urge ugly necessities on us when the better angels of our nature should be trusted. The questions Socrates asks force individual souls to make hard distinctions between the erotic ideas outside the cave and the false but sacralized images within it, thus exposing seams in the cave's ideology and cracking open the ovate order of the city. A self-proclaimed gadfly from sacred Delphi to the corrupt Athenians, thus repaying the favor rational Athena did poetic Apollo by acquitting Orestes, Socrates acts as a *daimon* or divine emissary separating the holy from the base. He smuggles holy ignorance and humble wonder into an *agora*, a place where everything has a price and every man is a thing. It

took Socrates' clash with the poets to remind the Athenians of the soul's uncanny dignity, but even this epic *agon* finally relies on Plato's philosophic poetry to be preserved for posterity.

Poetry and Human Wisdom

Regardless of the final fate of Socrates' soul, Plato's self-deconstructing myths set him in the underworld/collective unconscious of Athens exposing the ignorance and mendacity of other famous figures from mythology and history (*Apology* 41a–c). We thus see a poetic philosopher artfully deploy better poetry to clarify, wrestle with, or counter other unwholesome or ill-reified myths about matters above the heavens and under the earth. Perhaps the lasting value of poems is not what in they say of gods but in what the gods reveal through them about the human condition. Bluntly put, poets do not know gods but may be inspired to see man through the eyes of a god; we can never know gods in themselves but only see their essential powers at work on the soul. The poets' accounts must always be subjected to critical scrutiny.

Ultimately, though the poets are both inspired mouthpieces of the gods and makers of profane images, they cannot distinguish the one from the other. Easily flattered by wily politicians into thinking themselves wise, they confuse signifiers with what they signify and give dogmatic meaning to once winged images, going on to become manipulated makers of mimetic morality for the muddled masses. They deny what is most crucial to Socrates, the idea that the gods do not play favorites but respond to the distinctive if different erotic strivings of every soul. However ineptly it has been acted on, this idea is the hidden basis of democracy. Even more importantly, every soul has the power to understand and be part of a conversation about what other mortals said and did in the past. This is a license to participate in the collective unconscious of one's own culture. Education is being initiated into this conversation.

This conversation, as fluid as the soul, is the very lifeblood of true politics. Yet, since souls are born ignorant, and inspired poems tend to become clichéd over time, much depends on those who wrestle with poems and recover their power to point beyond themselves. Since every political regime is based on sacred words about its origins and meaning, these founding poems must be protected by being recalled diligently yet also saved from being reified by a remembrance that is too pious. Every citizen must be given an opportunity to participate in this process, one in which words and deeds are put in common to provide both young and old with occasions to live, learn, and interpret their tradition. While the soul's innate power to wrestle with gods and the poets is

the basis of human rights and democracy itself, philosophy is the way by which the erotic spark in each soul is guided to the fullest realization of its potential for human interaction. Though philosophy, the love of wisdom, leads the soul from the cave's security, this quest is only consummated when the wisdom of love brings the soul home and leads it to perform erotic deeds and give birth to new poems.

Plato finished the process begun by Socrates when the old philosopher returned to the cave and died gloriously. Inspired by this feat and writing after the great poets had died, his literary resurrection of a Socrates made young and beautiful redeemed poetry through the new genre of philosophy. To fully understand Plato's account of Socrates' trial, it must be seen that that the three dialogues *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito* make up a dramatic trilogy, with the *Phaedo* serving as a satyr-play that mocks any attempt to turn Socrates into a cosmologist or philosophy into an exact science. We first see Socrates (like Oedipus confounding the Sphinx) killing the gods of the city in the *Euthyphro*; their Furies then take revenge on him in the *Apology*; and in the *Crito* he receives them back into the city as forms or laws. Socrates' life and death thus form a sublime tragedy, seen fully at its end only by the hero and a few spectators. It is up to them to keep his noble memory alive by their own *eros*.

True Philosophy vs. Political Theology

I will end on a provocative note, claiming to have shown that true philosophy, as opposed to cosmology, is much closer to poetry than metaphysics. Far more at ease with imperfection and error, it is a human lifestyle that seeks after and serves as a good life for all. It is neither held hostage by dogmatic authority nor made ugly and intimidating by technical jargon. Philosophy only becomes a pseudo-science when it forgets its poetic origins and seeks to expunge freedom from the soul to execute a perfect method. Seeking to be wise technocrats in imitation of an omniscient god, we only see men as herd animals and lose our self-knowledge. Yet while this means that Socrates and Plato did not claim to be wise, as Aristotle did, it follows also that the infallible divine wisdom passed on from Aristotle and Augustine to Anselm and Aquinas, with assists from Alexander and Augustus, hands down sacred data (then used to *make* men good citizens and now guilty Christians) serves the city's gods and has little to do with Socrates. He would send us back with rich eyes and empty hands to *wrestle with* the best poets: Homer, the Greek tragedians, the Gospels, and Shakespeare. True philosophy has scant patience for priests,

power, precedents, or protocol. Unlike those who venerate the chain of transmission, its playful spirit is better able to recover and enrich the original sublime experience that was poetized.

Philosophical poetry is best exemplified by how Homer's *Odyssey* revised his *Iliad* before being turned to tragedy by Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and then finally translated to philosophy by Plato. While all these works show how the soul battles with the rage and sorrow that gave it life, the hero of the *Apology* would have shocked Achilles; Socrates looks more like Thersites than anyone else. But maybe only his valor and honesty can save the city and recover the divine. Even Achilles, who tried to sack Troy by his unaided efforts, would have admired the old man's erotic courage as he took on Athens and its Furies. Socrates' life and death inspired a new poetic genre that restored a city, once drunk on prideful rage, to philosophy. In our age, as fear-based faith allies with technocratic nihilism to raze the roots of Christian humanism, perhaps only Socratic thought and Platonic poetry can relink our souls to the Good?

Notes

1. This line appears in Auden's "Ode to W. B. Yeats." See Auden 82.
2. Strauss provides the reference to Xenophon that sets Plato's *Republic* in its proper pedagogic context. See Strauss 65.
3. Ranasinghe, *Socrates and the Gods* 9–66.
4. For this tremendous insight into Hades I am greatly indebted to Eva Brann. See Brann 197–200.
5. Ranasinghe, *The Soul of Socrates* 144–78.
6. The best explanation of this very complicated issue is found in Akenson.
7. Ranasinghe, *Socrates in the Underworld* 70–71 and 120.
8. This is the main theme of his *Confessions*. See for instance 10.50 in Augustine. Some of the best examples of Augustine's vitriolic assault on human self-control and self-knowledge are in *The City of God* 19. See Augustine 433–478.

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