

## SOCRATES: PLATONIC POLITICAL IDEAL\*

*Sócrates: el ideal político platónico*

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay articulates the differences and suggests the similarities between the practices of Socratic political speaking and those of Platonic political writing. The essay delineates Socratic speaking and Platonic writing as both erotically oriented toward ideals capable of transforming the lives of individuals and their relationships with one another. Besides it shows that in the *Protagoras* the practices of Socratic political speaking are concerned less with Protagoras than with the individual young man, Hippocrates. In the *Phaedo*, this ideal of a Socrates is amplified in such a way that Platonic writing itself emerges as capable of doing with readers what Socratic speaking did with those he encountered. Socrates is the Platonic political ideal. The result is a picture of the transformative political power of Socratic speaking and Platonic writing both.

*Keywords:* Plato, Socrates, dialogue, politics.

**RESUMEN**

El ensayo articula diferencias y sugiere similitudes entre las prácticas del diálogo político de Sócrates y aquellas de la escritura política de Platón. Propone, además, que tanto el diálogo socrático como la escritura platónica se orientan eróticamente hacia ideales capaces de transformar las vidas de los individuos y sus relaciones. Demuestra que en el *Protágoras* las prácticas del diálogo socrático se ocupan menos de Protágoras que del joven Hipócrates. En el *Fedón*, este ideal de Sócrates se amplía de tal manera que la misma escritura platónica aparece como capaz de hacer con los lectores lo que el diálogo de Sócrates hacía con sus interlocutores. Sócrates es el ideal político platónico. El resultado es una visión del poder de transformación política tanto del diálogo socrático como de la escritura platónica.

*Palabras clave:* Platón, Sócrates, diálogo, política.

\* In all of the articles, references to texts in Greek follow the nomenclature of the Stephanus edition. See citation appendix.

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To disentangle the political activity Socrates practices in the dialogues from the political practice of Platonic writing and to suggest their intimate interconnection, let us begin with two letters and two dreams. On the face of it, the first letter appears as a kind of performative contradiction; for its author instructs its reader to “read this letter now at once many times and burn it completely” (*Ep.* II 314c5); and yet, the letter endures.<sup>1</sup> It has come to be included as the second of Plato’s *Epistles*, a rare text purporting to be one of the few writings in his own voice.<sup>2</sup> The letter, addressed to Dionysus of Syracuse, expresses a reticence to write and articulates a concern that the written text will be ridiculed because it discloses certain ideas to those unable to understand. It is written:

The greatest precaution is not to write but to learn thoroughly; for it is not possible for things written not to come out [ἐκπεσεῖν]. On account of these things I have never written concerning these things; there is no writing [σύγγραμμα] of Plato, nor will there be; the present [writings] are the sayings of a Socrates become beautiful and new. (*Ep.* II 314b7-c4)<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 All quotations from Plato are taken from the five volume edition of the Oxford Classical Texts (Plato). Translations are my own. The existence of the second letter need not be ascribed exclusively to the disobedience of the reader, for the author may have kept a draft of the letter despite the injunction for the reader to destroy it. Harward suggests that there is nothing “improbable in the supposition that, after giving such a direction, Plato preserved his own draft of the letter, which has in due course been the source of our text” (175).
  - 2 The letters of Plato seem to have been widely accepted as genuine in antiquity, a judgment that was, as Morrow suggests, “almost completely reversed in modern times with the rise of critical historical methods” (6). Hackforth considers letters III, VII and VIII “Platonic beyond all reasonable doubt,” but the rest of more questionable authority, while I, II, V, VI and XII “are unquestionably spurious” (34-35). Although Bluck ultimately argues that the second letter “is probably spurious,” he suggests that the evidence for this is much more tenuous than is often recognized by those who want to argue against its being genuine (Bluck 140). Harward is himself skeptical of the “sceptical attitude in the extreme form in which it was held almost universally in Germany and England” during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (71). Harward argues that the objections against the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter are groundless (*cf. id.* 77), and he goes on to insist upon the remarkable nature of the letter, suggesting “the writer was certainly a master of thought and language” (*id.* 164-65). The question, however, of the genuine author of the letter is of secondary importance to the fact that the text, having been received into the tradition, suggests that already in antiquity the difference between Socratic saying and Platonic writing and their connection were of decisive importance.
  - 3 In order to address what Bluck calls the awkwardness of the formulation, “τὰ δὲ νῦν λεγόμενα”, the present translation follows his suggestion that one “might find a contrast between λεγόμενα and σύγγραμμα” in the text such that a distinction is voiced between Platonic writing and Socratic saying. Bluck then suggests the following

The passage amplifies the difference between Plato and Socrates even as it articulates their connection, for there is no written work of Plato's own, and yet there are these written texts, the Platonic dialogues, that present the sayings of a Socrates become beautiful and new. This new and beautiful Socrates is, in fact, an ideal that embodies the practice of a political philosophy Platonic writing can trace but cannot fully enact. Even so, however, the attempt to put such a Socrates into words enacts a political practice that requires a politics of reading.

The letter, be it spurious or genuine, makes specific demands on the reader to whom it is addressed that betray the deep and lasting influence of what can only be called the spirit of Socratic dialogue – a spirit constitutive of the political practice that is Socratic philosophy. The writer insists that whenever Dionysius hears someone speaking ill of Plato or his associates, he must “send letters and ask me, for I will neither hesitate nor be ashamed to say the truth [τάληθῆ λέγειν]” (*Ep.* II 310d4-6). Later, the writer encourages Dionysius to undertake a “true test” of the things Plato is teaching him, so that they might “take root [προσφύσεται];” and he goes on to insist that this process of inquiry ought to continue for “many years,” for many people have grown old hearing and examining these things (*cf. Ep.* II 313d1-3; 314a7-b5). If the injunction to assiduously ask after the truth over the whole course of a life is at the heart of the Socratic practice of philosophy, the promise to speak truth in response without hesitation or shame is itself the condition under which that practice of philosophy becomes political.

The second letter to which we might attend in the attempt to uncover the difference and connection between the politics of Socratic saying and that of Platonic writing is the letter that has been received as the seventh in the collection of Platonic *Epistles*. The seventh letter resonates with the second in its articulation of the limits of writing, of the importance of questioning over the course of a life, and of a teaching that comes to be nourished in the soul.<sup>4</sup> In the *Seventh Letter*, the author suggests that:

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 translation: “There is no *treatise* by Plato περὶ τούτων, and the present works (τὰ δὲ νῦν) are simply *sayings* of a re-furbished Socrates” (150). Bluck leaves “concerning these things” in the Greek, “περὶ τούτων”, because precisely the things to which the text refers is a matter of debate: it refers either to the nature of first principles discussed earlier in the letter (*Ep.* II 313a) or, as Bluck prefers, to the general matters discussed between Plato and Dionysius.

4 The more widely accepted view that the *Seventh Letter* is genuine, when combined with the manner in which it resonates with the *Second Letter*, has caused Harward to

There is not, nor will there every be a writing [σύγγραμμα] of mine concerning these things [*i.e.*, the things Plato is trying to teach Dionysius]; for it cannot be enunciated [ῥητὸν γὰρ οὐδαμῶς] like other things learned; but from much conversation in common [συνουσία] concerning the thing itself and from a life lived together [συζῆν], suddenly [ἐξαίφνης], like a light kindled by a leaping flame, it comes to be in the soul and at once nourishes itself. (*Ep.* VII 341c4-d2)

If the passage from the *Second Letter* emphasizes the centrality of the figure of Socrates, this passage articulates further the importance of philosophy as an activity lived in community with others, oriented by a concern for the “thing itself.” This passage gives voice to the structure of the political practice of Socratic philosophy in which a common orientation toward the thing itself – be it truth, justice, the beautiful or the good – over the course of a lifetime lived in community with others has the capacity to transform individuals and the communities in which they live. The eloquence of the passage, if it is not Plato, suggests a deep and abiding commitment to this Socratic practice of philosophy as politics; and if the letter is by Plato, it points to the possibility that Plato, even in those rare moments when he wrote in his own voice, was himself willing to attempt to put the practice of Socratic politics into writing.

This decision to write separates Plato from his teacher. Two dreams help to delineate this separation even if they also reinforce their common practice. The first is a dream Socrates was said to have had the night before he first encountered Plato. Diogenes Laertius captures the basics of the story:

It is said that Socrates saw in a dream a young swan on his knees, which at once grew feathers and flew off after making a pleasant, piercing sound. The next day when he was introduced to Plato, he said that this was the bird. (Laertius III.5)

The swan is the sacred bird of Apollo, so the story connects Plato closely to the god to whom Socrates himself is said, in the *Apology* and *Phaedo*, to dedicate his life’s activity.<sup>5</sup> In a more detailed account

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 suggest that the *Second Letter* too ought to perhaps be considered genuinely Platonic and written prior to the writing of the seventh (*cf.* 165-66).

- 5 Plato depicts the philosophical life of Socrates as intimately connected with Apollo from beginning to end. In the *Apology*, the animating principle of the entire life of Socrates is said to have been his attempt to understand the Delphic oracle’s suggestion that no one is wiser than he, an endeavor which led him to come to the god’s assistance whenever someone without wisdom claimed to be wise (*Ap.* 21a-23c). The *Phaedo* is set in a context saturated fully by Apollonian themes: from the mission to

by Apuleius, the swan that comes to Socrates in the dream is associated explicitly with the region of the Academy and is said to fly onto the knees of Socrates from the altar of Eros found there (Riginos 22, 24). Although the addition of these details were likely designed by later members of the Academy to associate Plato and Socrates more closely with the place itself, the identification of the erotic origin of the bird remains suggestive of the extent to which the lives of Plato and Socrates were animated by a certain erotic orientation toward others and the world in which they lived, rooted in a concern for what is best and most just.<sup>6</sup>

This erotic orientation, rooted at once in a deep recognition of human finitude and an ineluctable desire to know, characterizes the philosophical practice of Socrates and Plato both. But if the dream of Socrates reinforces this shared erotic orientation, it also amplifies the elusive nature of Plato's philosophical practice, enacted as it is by way of the pleasant, piercing songs that are the dialogues. In this Socrates' dream resonates with a second dream to which we might attend in this initial attempt to delineate the Socratic from the Platonic practice of political philosophy in a way that itself might uncover the political nature of reading. This second dream was said to have appeared to Plato himself shortly before his death. Olympiodorus puts it this way:

When he was about to die, he saw in a dream that he became a swan moving from tree to tree and in this way caused much trouble to the bird catchers. Simmias the Socratic judged from this, that he would not be captured by those desiring to interpret him. (2. 156-9)

If Socrates' dream suggests the erotic origins of Platonic philosophy, Plato's dream articulates its erotic legacy.

These two dreams of Plato as a swan must be heard in conjunction with Plato's own depiction of Socrates in the *Phaedo* who said he considered himself a "co-servant with the swans, and sacred to the same god" (85b4-5). The philosophical practices of Socrates and Plato are pursued under the auspices of Apollo. But if the life of Socrates is motivated by the prophetic voice of Apollo's Delphic insistence that "no one is wiser" than Socrates (*Ap.* 21a-23c), Plato's life is animated

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Delos sent every year as a promise to Apollo, which opens the space for the dialogue itself, to Socrates' attempts to write "in honor of the god" (61b2-3), to the prophetic swans who sing before they die and who are said to be "servants of the god" (85a2-3), and ending with an appeal to Asclepius, Apollo's son (118a). As Ahl aptly puts it, "Socrates' career is bounded by Apollo's major shrines; and his death is linked with the island of Apollo's birth" (374).

6 Riginos suggests that the motif in Apuleius served to reinforce "the connection between Eros and philosophy emphasized in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*" (24).

by Apollo's more poetic voice. The swan itself has been said to signify Apollo's poetic nature, and this poetic dimension sets the Platonic practice of philosophy apart from Socratic practice, despite the writing Socrates undertakes during the last days of his life.<sup>7</sup> If the Apollonian injunction led Socrates to engage those he encountered in dialogue and, in so speaking to and with them, caused him also to come to terms with his own finitude and cultivate philosophy as the "caring practice of dying" (*Phd.* 67e4-5), perhaps his turn to writing at the end suggests that the peculiar form of writing Plato undertook was itself an attempt to cultivate the caring practice of dying. Plato's practice of the politics of writing would thus be a continuation of the practice of Socratic political speaking.

The two letters and two dreams suggest a continuity between the things Socrates says in the dialogues and ways Plato writes; but they also articulate the difference between speaking and writing that must be permitted to inform our investigation into the practices of Socratic and Platonic philosophical politics. If the dialogues themselves are heard as the sweet, piercing song of the swan as it separates from Socrates and takes refuge in the trees where it has eluded interpreters ever since, perhaps it is in the Socrates "become beautiful and new" that something of the practice of Platonic political writing might be discerned.

However, if the practice of Socratic political speaking is itself heard in the things said by Socrates to those he encounters in the dialogues, insight into the practice of Platonic political writing can only be gained if the dialogues are read in a double register. The first, which concentrates on the things Socrates says in the dialogues and on the place in which and people to whom he says them, may be identified as the *topology of Socratic politics*, for it points to the site (τόπος) of Socratic political speaking (λέγειν). The second, which focuses on the things Plato writes and the site of encounter between reader and text, may be called the *topography of Platonic politics*, for it attends to the site (τόπος) of Platonic political writing (γράφειν).<sup>8</sup> Yet even as the difference between the topological and the topographical practices of politics in the dialogues guides our investigation into Socratic and Platonic politics both, charting a path between them also allows us to discern the deep affinity between the political practices of Socratic saying and those of Platonic writing. This affinity has already been heard

7 Socrates' writing is itself made possible by a stay of execution during the period of purification in the city during a festival to Apollo and has Apollo himself as its original focus (*Phd.* 61a1-b7). Fredrick Ahl speaks eloquently of swans as symbols of Apollo's "poetic soul" (cf. 375).

8 This distinction was originally outlined in Long (2011b 374 fn. 21).

to come to language in the inherited letters and dreams with which we here began, for Plato does not write in his own voice, he writes rather a Socrates made beautiful and new. In choosing to practice philosophy by writing a living picture of an idealized Socrates, Plato implicitly recognizes that the power of Socratic saying lies not in its ability to be grasped intellectually and in abstraction from lived experience, but rather in its capacity to take root in the animate bodies of those willing to listen attentively and respond in ways that weave a concern for the just and the good into community with others. The practice of Platonic political writing requires a politics of engaged reading.

To begin in this way with these two letters and two dreams, then, is to have been led already down a certain path in which the difference between the Socratic and Platonic practices of philosophy are amplified and interwoven. Taking our orientation from this beginning, we may now continue along a path of inquiry that leads to a deeper understanding of the topology of Socratic politics. This itinerary begins with the *Protagoras*, a dialogue in which Socrates is shown to be concerned both with the course of the life of his young associate, Hippocrates, and with the arc of his own. Here we discern the contours of the topology of Socratic politics as a situated space of appearing determined by the attempt to speak in ways that open new, more enriching possibilities of human community. Our itinerary turns then to the *Phaedo* in which the practices of Socratic political saying are heard to be tightly bound up with the practices of Platonic writing, the two being decisively determined, as our two dreams have already anticipated, by the “caring practice of dying.” The *Phaedo* presents us with Socrates as a Platonic Ideal. Having traversed this path of inquiry leading from the political practices of Socratic saying to those of Platonic writing, we will be in a position to suggest how the Socratic ideal informs the practices of Platonic political writing in ways that cultivate in readers habits of thinking and acting capable of transforming the realities of human political life.

### **Protagoras**

The *Protagoras* has a rather odd doubled frame that sets the entire dialogue into a context that at once lends insight into the contextual nature of Socratic politics and illustrates how Platonic writing forces us to read the action portrayed together with the words conveyed. The dialogue begins with a question posed by an unnamed friend who Socrates encounters after having had a rather long conversation with the famous sophist, Protagoras, at the house of Callias, a wealthy Athenian. The dialogue begins with the friend asking: “Whence, Socrates, do you appear?” (*Prt.* 309a1), and in so beginning implicitly



anticipates two themes that will emerge in the dialogue Socrates narrates about his conversation with Protagoras. The first theme concerns how Socrates himself appears in public, the second concerns the manner in which the course of Socrates' life is bound up with the course of the lives of those he encounters. Attention to Socratic appearing and to the question of what animates the course of a life in the dialogue uncovers three dimensions of the practice of Socratic politics. First, Socratic politics involves the caring attention to the soul of an individual, in this case, that of Hippocrates; second, it endeavors to cultivate a dialogue in which the interlocutors speak in voices of their own; and third, the Socratic practice of politics is animated always by a concern to the course for his whole life.<sup>9</sup>

### Caring Attention to the Individual

If the question of one's life course is already implicitly introduced by the initial question of the dialogue, the extent to which Socrates himself is willing always to allow the course of his own life to be determined by his concern for each individual with whom he associates is manifest in his initial response to Hippocrates at the beginning of the narrated portion of the dialogue. This encounter with and response to Hippocrates marks the second of the dialogue's double frame; for once the unnamed associate of Socrates hears that he has just come from a conversation with Protagoras, the friend enjoins Socrates to tell the story that is the dialogue itself. Socrates' willingness to oblige, indeed, his gratitude for an attentive audience – "For I would be gratified if you listened," he says (*Prt.* 310a5)– suggests the degree to which Socrates understands his own life as bound reciprocally up with those with whom he speaks.

The dialogue then has a kind of second beginning as Socrates tells of an urgent encounter he had with Hippocrates that very morning, just before daybreak. Hippocrates arrived early at Socrates' house and woke him, making a huge racket banging at the door with his stick (*Prt.* 310b1-2). Socrates' first concern was the well-being of Hippocrates and he is relieved when Hippocrates reports that it is not bad but good news that brings him by so early: the arrival of Protagoras in Athens. This is not news to Socrates, who appears more attuned to the happenings in the city than Hippocrates. Thus, already in this initial encounter we are offered a sense of the intimacy of their relation, of the concern Socrates has for Hippocrates and of the deep connection Socrates has with the city.

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9 These themes are investigated in greater detail than is possible here in a recent article in *Epoché* (cf. Long 2011b).



Hippocrates can hardly contain his enthusiasm for the possibility that he might associate with Protagoras and share in the knowledge he claims to have. Socrates explicitly recognizes this enthusiasm as “courage and passionate excitement [τὴν ἀνδρείαν καὶ τὴν πτοίησιν]” (*Prt.* 310d3), anticipating with these terms at once a theme of the discussion Socrates has with Protagoras about the nature of courage and the erotic nature of Hippocrates’ interest in learning from Protagoras. In the *Symposium*, Diotima uses “ἡ πτοίησις” to describe the effect of beauty on someone who is pregnant and ready to give birth, saying “one becomes greatly excited concerning the beautiful because one is released from the great pains one had” (*Smp.* 206d8-e1).<sup>10</sup> To have Socrates explicitly recognize ‘πτοίησις’ in Hippocrates is to underscore the erotic dimension of Hippocrates’ interest in Protagoras. The vocabulary is important from both a topological and a topographical perspective. Topologically, Socrates sees an erotic attraction to wisdom in Hippocrates that goes some distance in explaining why Socrates himself would have been so intimately interested in Hippocrates and willing, as he shows himself to be, to interrupt his day to intervene with Protagoras on his behalf. Topographically, however, for Plato to have Socrates recognize “τὴν ἀνδρείαν καὶ τὴν πτοίησιν” in Hippocrates at this early stage in the dialogue invites the reader both to anticipate the theme of courage that emerges in the dialogue and to consider more carefully the connection between an erotic desire for wisdom and the meaning of courage itself.

This can be felt more acutely at the end of the dialogue, when courage and wisdom are brought together in a rather different way than they appear initially here in the person of Hippocrates. Having reduced Protagoras to gestures of nodding assent, for Socrates and Alcibiades had shamed him earlier in the dialogue into allowing himself to be questioned (*Prt.* 348c), Socrates articulates the meaning of courage in terms of wisdom: “is wisdom not courage about what is terrible and is not terrible?” (360d4-5). To understand not only courage, but also, being just and being sensible as certain ways of being wise –as Socrates imagines the ending of the argument itself suggesting– is to situate the question of excellence into the context of a life erotically oriented toward wisdom. The philosophical life is itself animated by a concern for excellence. This, indeed, is the ultimate context in which the *Protagoras* as a dialogue unfolds, for although the discussion between Protagoras and Socrates circles around the question as to

10 This connection between the vocabulary of the *Protagoras* and the *Symposium* in this regard has been established by Denyer (*cf.* 70).

whether excellence can be taught, the dramatic action of the dialogue centers on the very soul of a courageous and erotic Hippocrates.

The central concern of the dialogue is touched upon even as Socrates and Hippocrates walk together in the courtyard, waiting for a decent hour to arrive when they might reasonably call upon Protagoras at the house of Callias. With courage and passion, Hippocrates insists upon establishing an association with Protagoras, though under Socratic questioning, it quickly becomes clear that he has no idea what sort of a person Protagoras is or what sorts of things he might be capable of teaching. This uninformed enthusiasm is of the greatest concern to Socrates, and he attempts to bring the danger of it into focus for Hippocrates by drawing an analogy between the care of the body and that of the soul. For presumably, Socrates suggests, Hippocrates would not turn the health of his body over to someone about whom he knew so little. He goes on to insist:

But here it concerns that which you believe to be greater than your body, namely your soul, that by which you yourself become deserving [χρηστοῦ] or worthless [πονητοῦ] by means of all the things that you do either well or badly. (*Prt.* 313a6-9)

This passage articulates both the central concern of the dialogue and the manner in which Socrates understands the intimate connection between who one is and what one does.<sup>11</sup> Upon first conversing with Protagoras, Socrates makes it clear that what animates him in this context is to help Hippocrates “learn what will result for him, if he associates with you [σοι συνῆ]” (318a3-4).<sup>12</sup> The question as to whether or not the excellences are capable of being taught unfolds from this central concern for how it will turn out for Hippocrates if he associates with Protagoras.<sup>13</sup>

11 This connection is taken up in earnest in the conversation Socrates has with Gorgias in the *Gorgias*, which begins by Socrates instructing Chaerephon to ask Gorgias who he is and then proceeds to consider in detail the sorts of things he does with words (*Grg.* 447c-d). For a discussion of this, see Long (“Attempting the Political Art”).

12 Just prior to this passages, Socrates says: “Ἴπποκράτης γὰρ ὄδε τυγχάνει ἐν ἐπιθυμίᾳ ὧν τῆς σῆς συνουσίας”, which might be translated as “Hippocrates here happens to long for intercourse with you,” in order to capture in English something of the erotic undertones of the statement. Denyer draws our attention to the sexual connotations of both ἐπιθυμία –sexual desire, lust– and συνουσία –sexual intercourse (91). The entire passage, then, can be heard to reinforce the erotic elements endemic to Hippocrates’ desire to associate with Protagoras.

13 Zuckert seems to agree that the most immediate concern for Socrates in the dialogue is to “preserve his soul from possible corruption” (228).

### Speaking in a Voice of One's Own

Discerning precisely what sort of teacher Protagoras would be for Hippocrates requires that Socrates find a way to make Protagoras engage him in genuine dialogue. The very first image we are given of Protagoras is of him walking up and down the colonnade with two rows of people following him on either side. Seeing this, Socrates compares Protagoras to Orpheus, for his voice seemed to mesmerize those who followed him. Socrates notes too, the comical way that each time Protagoras turned, those following took great care to get out of his way (*Prt.* 314e-5b). The image is striking, and its significance seems not to have been lost on Socrates; for the culture of the community following Protagoras does not seem to be dialogical.<sup>14</sup> And yet, Socrates will need to transform the gathering there into one in which enough of a dialogue is possible for Socrates to discern precisely how an association with Protagoras will affect Hippocrates. Socrates accomplishes this to the partial degree that he does in the dialogue by leveraging the desire of those gathered to hear him engage Protagoras in dialogue. His strategy here seems to be to put the possibility of that exchange into question by threatening to leave –for he says repeatedly that he has someplace to go– only then to allow those gathered to intervene on behalf of their continuing the dialogue.

If the impetus behind the visit to Callias's house is the well-being of Hippocrates, the crisis at the center of the dialogue illustrates the extent to which the course of Socrates' own life is at issue. The dialogue is crafted in ways that draw this out. Plato not only stages a crisis at the center of the dialogue in which Socrates is physically restrained and compelled to remain (*Prt.* 335c7-d5), but he also situates the dialogue itself at about the mid-point of Socrates' life.<sup>15</sup> These poetic decisions invite us to consider the extent to which the well-being of Hippocrates is intimately connected to the course of the life of Socrates. Thus the three dimensions of Socratic politics with which we began the discussion of the *Protagoras* coalesce at the crisis in the middle. This crisis, however, not only reveals something of the logic of Socratic politics, it also suggests something of the practice of Platonic political writing; for in crafting the dialogue in the way he does, Plato draws our attention to the life of Socrates itself as an ideal that will be

14 From this initial appearance of Protagoras in the dialogue, Griswold suggests that the culture of the community surrounding Protagoras would have been one in which pupils listen passively to the wisdom dispersed by the master who is himself no held accountable for the things he says (*cf.* 292).

15 The dramatic date of the *Protagoras* is generally accepted as 432BCE (*cf.* Walsh). Given the death of Socrates at the age of 70 in 399, it is not unreasonable to understand the action of the *Protagoras* as occurring at the mid-point of the life of Socrates.

seen, as we turn our attention to the *Phaedo*, to be capable of cultivating in us a concern for the course of our own finite lives.

The crisis at the center of the *Protagoras* is instigated by Socrates who, having failed for a third time to convince Protagoras to submit to questioning, gets up to leave. Callias, however, restrains him. This is how Socrates describes it:

and as I was getting up, Callias seized me with his right hand and took hold of my cloak with his left, like this, and said: ‘We will not let you go, Socrates; if you go, the dialogues [οἱ διάλογοι] will not be the same for us; I ask you to remain for our sake. As for me, not a single thing would please me to hear more than you and Protagoras engaged in dialogue [διαλεγόμενων]. Please, Socrates, do this favor for all of us’. (*Prt.* 335c7-d5)

Aside from the manner in which Callias physically restrains Socrates here, what is most striking about the passage is the emphasis he places on dialogue, evoking the term twice in this short plea.<sup>16</sup> In response, Socrates picks up on this in order to emphasize in a poignantly sarcastic tone the difference between dialogue and demagoguery: “I used to think to be together [τὸ συνεῖναι] and engaging in dialogue with one another [ἀλλήλοις διαλεγόμενους] was different from demagoguery [τὸ δημηγορεῖν]” (*Prt.* 336b2-3).<sup>17</sup> The sarcasm of the sentence suggests that Socrates is losing confidence in his own earlier hope that Protagoras is not merely good at producing long speeches, but is also able “to give short answers when being questioned and when questioning to wait to receive the answer” (329b2-4). Protagoras’s ability or lack thereof to cultivate a culture of genuine dialogue with those he encounters is central to the main concern of the dialogue, namely, what will result for Hippocrates if he joins in association with Protagoras. Socrates’ willingness to leave at the mid-point of the dialogue is a sign that Socrates has heard enough to determine that Hippocrates would not be well served by taking up with Protagoras.

Callias, however, succeeds in restraining Socrates, and the others gathered there, led by Alcibiades, succeed in maintaining their community by agreeing to have Protagoras first ask rather than answer questions. The long and philosophically significant discussion of the

16 For a discussion of the dynamics of Callias’ gesture of restraint and the way it resonates with the passage from the *Republic* in which Polemarchus’s slave-boy similarly restrains Socrates, see Long (2011b 364-65 and 374 fn. 27).

17 Denyer emphasizes the sarcastic nature of the formulation (*cf.* 139).

poetry of Simonides then unfolds.<sup>18</sup> That discussion was prompted by Protagoras, who insists that the “greatest part of being and educated man is to be clever [δεινόν] concerning poetry” (*Prt.* 338e6-339a1). Having established a distinction between the uneducated who have nothing to say and thus rely on poetry for entertainment, and the educated who are capable of speaking in voices of their own, Socrates suggests that those who have been educated, “because they are sufficient themselves with themselves, are able to enter into community without that sort of silly talk and childish play, but through their own voice, speaking and listening in orderly turn” (347d5-e1). If to enter into community with others, speaking one’s own voice and listening in turn is, for Socrates, the sign of an educated person, then the sign of a genuine community of education would be one in which those very dialogical abilities to give voice to one’s own conviction and to listen in turn to the views of others are cultivated. This, however, is precisely the dialogical community Socrates sought and failed to establish with Protagoras in order to determine if he would be capable of nurturing the excellences of dialogue in the young Hippocrates.

### The Whole of a Life

But cultivating this sort of dialogical community is not only an issue between Socrates and Protagoras, although given the repeated manner in which Socrates seeks and fails to establish a dialogue between them, it makes up a central theme of the *Protagoras* itself (329b, 331c-d; 347d-348a; 348c5-d1; 348d6-e2); nor is it a concern for Socrates exclusively in relation to Hippocrates, although Socrates and Hippocrates seem to have been engaged in precisely the sort of διαλέγεσθαι Socrates has in mind just before they entered the house of Callias (314c4);<sup>19</sup> rather, cultivating a community of dialogue with each individual he encounters is the central concern of Socrates’s entire life, as he himself suggests at the end of the dialogue. There he returns to the insightful and creative myth Protagoras had told at the beginning of their conversation in which, shortly after the gods created mortal animals, Epimetheus was said to have undertaken the task of handing out various abilities to various creatures but had left humans without any real means of survival. Prometheus, his brother, sought to rectify this situation by stealing for humans technical

18 Marina McCoy offers an account of why the discussion of the poetry of Simonides in the *Protagoras* is philosophically significant and not simply a digression (cf. 1999).

19 Denyer notes that the term appears in a rather unassuming way in this context, but also underscores διαλέγεσθαι as the manner in which Socrates prefers to converse (cf. 78-79).

wisdom [τὴν ἔντεχνον σοφίαν] from Athena and Hephaestus and the fire that such technology requires (320d1-322a2). Although according to the story, it was not until Hermes, at the behest of Zeus, brought a sense of shame [αἰδῶ] and justice [δική] to human-beings that we were able to develop our capacities for wisdom and politics (322c1-4), it seems that the gifts from Prometheus did give us a sense for the divine and enable us to develop language and articulate speech (322a2-7). These capacities, received from the god of “forethought” himself, enable human-beings to put articulate words to things, to create shelter and make clothing, and to grow food; in short, they enable us to make for ourselves a home in the world. And yet, these capacities for language and creativity, when combined with a sense for the divine, enable humans also to look beyond the home we have made for ourselves and so to grasp something of our limits and the whole of which we are a part.

The name ‘Prometheus’ itself points to this capacity to take care of what lies beyond the immediacy of the present. Socrates suggests as much at the end of the dialogue when he plays on the name itself, saying: “in your story, Prometheus was pleasing to me more than Epimetheus; for I concern myself with these things because I am consulting him and taking care [προμηθεύμενος] over the whole of my life” (*Prt.* 361d2-4). The things with which Socrates shows himself to be concerned here include not only the question of “what excellence is” but also and more fundamentally how the very consideration of that question in dialogue with others can itself, in turning them together toward the good, transform their lives individually and the life of their community together.

If the practice of Socratic *philosophy* can be understood to involve the attempt to cultivate with each individual a dialogical exchange in which both are able to speak in voices of their own and listen in turn, not for the sake of victory or glory, but for the sake of the whole life of each, then the practice of Socratic *politics* may be understood to involve allowing that very philosophical endeavor to be animated by an erotic orientation to the ideals of justice and the good, an orientation which itself, when lived in dialogical communication with others, can transform the realities of human community. The *Protagoras*, situated as it is in the middle of Socrates’ life, depicts him as already oriented toward the whole of his life; but what this is shown to involve in the dialogue is the concrete attempt to turn the life of the young Hippocrates toward the question of excellence by attempting to engage Protagoras in a dialogue concerning that very question itself. That Hippocrates is shown to leave at the end of the dialogue suggests

that he has perhaps been willing to change the course of his life in the wake of the things he heard said between Socrates and Protagoras.<sup>20</sup>

That Socrates is shown to be willing not only to interrupt his day to go to Protagoras with Hippocrates but also to repeat the things said between them there for the benefit of the unnamed friend he encounters at the beginning of the dialogue suggests that the way Plato crafted the dialogue was designed to emphasize for us the degree to which the λόγοι exchanged influenced the action portrayed. The dialogue itself depicts the practice of Socratic political speaking in action, for it portrays Socrates attempting to speak in ways that turn those he encounters toward the best.<sup>21</sup> This picture of Socratic political speaking is itself an expression of the Platonic political ideal: Socrates, become beautiful and new. This ideal is drawn in yet more vivid detail, rendered yet more compelling, by the picture Plato writes of Socrates in the *Phaedo*, a dialogue that opens the question of the relationship between Socratic saying and Platonic writing by itself opening with a picture of a writing Socrates.

### The *Phaedo*

The *Phaedo* neither begins nor ends with Socrates. It begins, rather, like the *Protagoras*, with a question; for Echecrates, whom *Phaedo* meets in Phlia not long after the death of Socrates, wants to know if *Phaedo* was himself present with Socrates on the day he died (*Phd.* 57a1-3).<sup>22</sup> It ends not, as might be expected, with the final words of Socrates, but with *Phaedo* speaking directly to Echecrates about the death of their friend. Like the *Protagoras*, the dialogue is a recollected narration, but unlike the *Protagoras*, the *Phaedo* is narrated neither by Socrates himself nor immediately after the event. The *Phaedo* is thus crafted as a performance of ἀλήθεια, or truth, understood in its

20 The final word of the dialogue, ἀπῆμεν, “we left,” implies that Hippocrates left with Socrates, now convinced that associating with Protagoras is unwise (cf. Long 2011b 370-71).

21 The attempt to “speak toward the best” is, in fact, precisely how, in the *Gorgias*, Socrates describes his own peculiar way of practicing the true political art (*Grg.* 521d6-e2). For a detailed discussion of that passage, see Long (“Attempting the Political Art”).

22 *Phaedo*’s home is Elis, not far from Phlius, an area with a strong community of Pythagoreans, of which Echecrates was one (cf. Burnet 1). Dorter illustrates how the person of *Phaedo* embodies some of the central themes of the dialogue he narrates. He invites us to consider *Phaedo* “as a symbol of the subject matter of the dialogue, for his life was characterized by liberation from bondage both in the literal and in the figurative sense of conversion to philosophy (82e ff.) and the dialogue is pre-eminent-ly about the theme of bondage and liberation” (Dorter 10).



originary Homeric sense. In Homer the word ‘ἀλήθεια’ is used in contexts in which one person asks a witness to reveal what happened at an event from which the person asking was absent. Truth in this most ancient sense involves the uncovering of an event remembered.<sup>23</sup> As a performance of truth, the *Phaedo* is written in a way that heightens the reader’s awareness of the irreducible distance between the event and its retelling, between the living presence of Socrates and his memory. Further, by depicting Phaedo’s own ongoing willingness to speak the truth about Socrates in the wake of his death, the dialogue is crafted in a way that shows the success of Socrates’ central teaching in the text: for those gathered not to become misologues and lose faith in the transformative power of words. As a written text, the *Phaedo* repudiates misology. It stands as powerful testimony to Plato’s commitment to the transformative power of the written word.

In order to discern, then, something of the political nature of the practice of Platonic writing, it will be necessary to attend to the manner in which the dialogue is *crafted*. But because the dialogue is crafted in such a complex and intricate way, here it will be sufficient to attend to the narrator himself, for the figure of Phaedo is inserted into the dialogue in ways that reinforce the three dimensions of the practice of Socratic politics we saw at work in the *Protagoras*. But Platonic writing in the *Phaedo* goes yet further, for it is also able to cultivate in the active reader an attentive hermeneutical imagination itself capable of transforming the ways we relate to one another and the world in which we live. If the site of Socratic politics is his relationship with each individual he encounters, the site of Platonic political writing is the relationship between text and reader; if the political power of Socratic speaking lies in the way it turns individual souls toward the ideals of justice, the beautiful and the good, the political power of Platonic writing lies in the way it turns the attention of each new generation of readers toward the ideal of a Socrates “become beautiful and new.”

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23 Chapter two of *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth* traces the history of this ancient understanding of ἀλήθεια (cf. Long 2011a 21-48). Heribert Boeder emphasizes that in Homer ἀλήθεια is at stake whenever someone “has to rely on the knowledge of a witness” (95). The etymology of ἀλήθεια suggests the way it is bound up with appearing and memory: “The term itself seems to articulate a privation of λήθειν, which is an older form of the verb λανθάνειν, meaning to elude notice, to be unseen. In the middle/passive voice, λανθάνειν takes on the meaning of to forget. Thus, ἀλήθεια involves not allowing something to elude notice or be forgotten” (Long 2011a 26). Historically, there has been some debate between those who think that ἀλήθεια does not involve a privation (cf. Friedländer 1 221-29) and the more mainstream and widely accepted position that it does (cf. Luther 11-12).

The contours of the topography of Platonic politics can be sufficiently discerned by attending to the ways Phaedo appears in the *Phaedo*; for his appearance and re-appearances serve to remind the reader that the dialogue *has been crafted*. The three dimensions of Socratic politics uncovered by our reading of the *Protagoras* will inform the investigation and allow us to recognize how Platonic writing attempts to do with us what Socratic saying attempts to do with the individuals Socrates encounters in the dialogues. If Socratic politics was seen in the *Protagoras* to involve caring attention to the soul of the individual, the cultivation of genuine dialogue and an orientation toward the course of the whole of a life, the enigmatic appearances of Phaedo in the *Phaedo* illustrate how these dimensions of Socratic political practice are translated into the practice of Platonic writing. As the dramatic narrator, Phaedo is speaker and author at once. He thus stands dramatically between Socrates and Echecrates even as he also stands structurally between Socrates and the reader. As narrator, Phaedo is the simulacrum of Plato, the writer. In depicting the affective power of Socratic political speaking, Phaedo's narrative teaches us something of the transformative power of speaking truth.

The opening encounter between Phaedo and Echecrates establishes the dialogue as itself a performance of the speaking of truth as ἀλήθεια. It thus calls the reader's attention to the manner in which every attempt to speak truth is conditioned by the finite nature of human-being. The frailty of Phaedo's memory at specific moments in the dialogue draws our attention first to the absence of Plato and second to the tenuous nature of every attempt to appeal to an ideal. Tracing the fragility of Phaedo's attempt to speak the truth leads us to the very center of the dialogue where we find, as we found in the *Protagoras*, a crisis. Here Phaedo reappears as a character in his own narrative, providing direct insight into the mood of those gathered and standing as a moving object of Socratic care. For the crisis in the middle of the dialogue is marked by the moment in which Socrates, responding to the growing despair of those gathered in the wake of the failure of his arguments for immortality, reaches out to caress Phaedo's hair. The gesture allows us to feel one of the dimensions of Socratic politics we encountered more abstractly in the *Protagoras*: the manner in which the care for an individual is also a way of caring for the community. By placing this very gentle, human gesture at the center of the dialogue, Platonic writing shows how caring for an individual can itself be a powerful way to care for the community. This gesture of intimacy is shown to be a transformative political action. Phaedo appears, again and finally, at the end of the dialogue to speak of Socrates as the best, the most thoughtful and most just of those

then living. In writing this ending into the dialogue, Plato reinforces the third dimension of Socratic politics we encountered at work in the *Protagoras*: the superlatives spoken of a now dead Socrates require us consider the things that will be said of us upon our death and thus cultivate in us a concern for the whole course of our lives and the lives of those with whom we are engaged.

### Attempting the Truth

The dialogue in which the death of Socrates is powerfully told is simply titled: *Phaedo*.<sup>24</sup> It begins, as many have noted, with the word ‘αὐτός’, which has, perhaps rightly, been thought to draw our attention to the deepest themes of the dialogue – what it means to be a self, the hypothetical existence of a form *itself*, the question of self-identity after death – but which also reinforces the concrete human presence of Phaedo not simply as a narrator, but as a human-being responding to a genuine request from his friend for the truth about Socrates.<sup>25</sup> If, in attempting to speak the truth in this way, Phaedo embodies the spirit of Socratic dialogue and shows himself to have been transformed by his encounter with Socrates, in thus depicting Phaedo, Plato calls attention to the power of words to shape the lives of individuals and inform the nature of their encounters with others.

Echecrates asks Phaedo if he himself was present on the day Socrates drank the poison because he yearns for a report that is “sure” [σφαρές] (*Phd.* 57b1). His is the natural human desire for that which is *certain* and *clear*; for these too are connotations heard in the Greek ‘σφαρές’.<sup>26</sup> This desire is made into the very principle of the *Phaedo* in the twofold sense of an ἀρχή: it marks the moment of beginning and is one of the dominating themes of this dialogue concerned with establishing the certainty of the immortality of the soul.<sup>27</sup> Yet Phaedo

24 Of this title, Burger writes: “The title of the *Phaedo* does not inform us about the subject of the conversation it represents but indicates only the proper name of the narrator, who simply reports a discussion in which he was almost entirely an observer. Phaedo plays a role only in the dramatic prologue, the concluding statement, and a brief interlude in the exact center of the dialogue; yet he perhaps justifiably provides its title, for the long speech he delivers takes the place of a Platonic dramatization of the last day of Socrates’ life” (14). This reinforces the suggestion made above that Phaedo is the simulacrum of Plato, the writer.

25 Emphasis on the importance of the first word of the dialogue is found in a number of commentaries, see for example, Benardete, Burger, and Davis (279); Brann, Kalkavage, and Salem (3-4) and Burger (15).

26 See σφαρές, adj. in Liddell and Scott.

27 For a discussion of the twofold meaning of ἀρχή as ‘inception’ and ‘domination’, see Schürmann (97). In the *Phaedo*, it is Kebes who embodies most obviously this

himself gives voice to a more humble approach, one that recognizes throughout the limits of human memory. If truth as ἀλήθεια involves the attempt to use words to stave off a certain forgetfulness, the manner in which Phaedo is made to remind us of the limits of his own memory inscribes into the text itself a warning against too adamant a desire for clarity and certainty. By inscribing the limits of Phaedo's memory into the text, Plato heightens the reader's awareness of the dimension of forgetting endemic to each attempt to articulate truth.

In response to Echecrates' request for the "surest possible report" [σαφέστατα ... ἀπαξείλαι] (*Phd.* 58d2), Phaedo replies in the vernacular of assaying. Twice he says that he will "try to go through it [πειράσομαι διηγήσασθαι]" (58d4-5; 59c8-d1). If these words of assaying signal Phaedo's appreciation of the finite nature of his own memory, their repetition inscribes assaying itself into the essay that is the *Phaedo*. To suggest that Plato wrote the *Phaedo* as a kind of essay is to point to the connection between the Socratic political art as an "attempt" to speak toward the best and the Platonic political art as an "attempt" to write toward an ideal. Phaedo is shown here to have cultivated the dimension of humility endemic to Socratic saying.

But the frailty of Phaedo's memory is written yet more deeply into the text, for he is made to forget and to gesture to his own forgetting at identifiable and important moments in the dialogue itself.<sup>28</sup> The first occurs at the beginning, just after he delineates the names of the local figures who were present in the prison cell. There he says: "But Plato, I think, was sick" (*Phd.* 59b10). Plato's literal appearance in the dialogue is shrouded in uncertainty.<sup>29</sup> Phaedo says "οἶμαι," "I think" or "I believe," here to underscore the tentative nature of the reason for Plato's absence. This vocabulary of uncertainty also marks the second

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concern for what is σαφές. For a detailed discussion of this, see my forthcoming book on Socratic and Platonic politics.

28 Burger emphasizes the important role Phaedo plays in heightening the reader's awareness of the tenuous nature of our access to Socrates' last day. She highlights the moments on which we will focus in some detail below. Phaedo's memory falters three times in the dialogue. 1) in identifying the reason for Plato's absence (*Phd.* 59d), 2) in suggesting precisely how the ideas are related to the things said to be named from them (102a-b) and 3) in remembering the precise name of the person who identifies the contradiction between Socrates' first and last arguments on the immortality of the soul to that point (103a) (*cf.* 14-15).

29 Contrast this oblique and uncertain reference to Plato with the only other place in the dialogues in which Plato writes himself explicitly into the text. At *Apology*, 38b6, Socrates points directly to Plato in the audience as someone who might afford to pay a penalty for his release. This demonstrative gesture towards Plato's concrete presence renders the obliqueness of Phaedo's comment yet more striking.

and third moments in which Phaedo's memory becomes unsure in the dialogue. Both occur in the middle of a difficult discussion of the relationship between the ideas and the things that receive their names from sharing in the ideas. Indeed, to show the frailty of Phaedo's memory twice here in close succession amplifies the tenuous nature of any account that seeks to articulate with precision the nature of the relationship between ideas and the sensible things thought to participate in them. Thus, when Echecrates presses Phaedo to articulate what Socrates said further in regard to the difficult question of participation, Phaedo replies: "This, I think" (102a10). He then goes on to give a vague sense that those gathered agreed that each of the ideas was something and that everything else has a share in them. The imprecision with which Phaedo remembers this resonates beautifully with the imprecision with which Socrates himself articulates the relationship between things and the ideas in which they are said to participate (100d3-7).<sup>30</sup>

The re-appearance of Phaedo in direct speech with Echecrates at this moment of the dialogue combined with the gesture to his lapse in memory are written into the text in a way that calls the reader's attention to the tenuous nature of the hypotheses Socrates posits concerning the ideas. Our attention is yet heightened a moment later when Phaedo mentions an objection someone present voiced in the face of Socrates' insistence that the idea of the Big can never become or be Small. Phaedo says "I don't remember for sure [σαφῶς] who it was," referring to the person who suggested that Socrates' view here contradicts the previous argument concerning the manner in which contraries come from contraries (*Phd.* 103a4-10). In forgetting precisely who said this, Phaedo calls explicit attention to the dimension of uncertainty endemic to his own attempt to articulate the truth of what happened. In writing this dimension of forgetting into the text, Plato uncovers the degree to which every attempt to articulate truth involves a dimension of concealment. Coming into direct and palpable contact with the limits of the human attempt to articulate the truth gives rise to the crisis at the very center of the *Phaedo*. This crisis is marked again by the appearance of Phaedo engaged in direct speech with Echecrates, and it is amplified by a poignant moment of intimate connection between Socrates and Phaedo that introduces the central teaching of the dialogue: do not become a misologue in the face of the limits of human λόγοι.

30 There Socrates says: "simply [ἀπλῶς], artlessly [ἀτέχνως] and perhaps naively [εὐήθως], I hold this close to myself: that nothing makes a thing beautiful but the presence of or communion with that Beautiful –or however or in whatever way it happens; for on this I do not assert anything definite [δυσχυρίζομαι]."

### Community in Crisis

There is, in the middle of the dialogue, a moment of unsettling silence. It comes just after Socrates tries to convince those gathered that the philosophical soul, attending always as much as possible to what is true and divine, ought not to be afraid that “upon its release from the body, the soul, being torn asunder and blown in different directions by the wind, may depart and no longer be anywhere at all” (*Phd.* 84b5-8) (*cf.* 77d7-e1). The possibility itself seems to have rendered Socrates and most of those there gathered speechless. Kebes and Simmias, however, seem to have managed to continue a dialogue, though now in hushed tones. After a long time, Socrates turned to them and invited them to articulate their concerns to everyone, an invitation that leads to the suggestion by Simmias that perhaps the soul is a kind of tuning, and by Kebes, that the soul might be like the cloak of a dead weaver, persisting beyond the life of one individual or even many, and yet not “altogether deathless” (85e3-88b8). Phaedo then describes the general feeling of those gathered this way:

Upon hearing these things, we were all ill disposed [ἀηδῶς διετέθημεν], as we told one another later, because we had been very much persuaded by the earlier account, but they now seemed to unsettle us [ἀναταράξαι] again and throw us down into distrust not only toward the things said previously, but also toward the things that would be said later; for fear that we should be unworthy judges or even that these things themselves might be untrustworthy (*Phd.* 88c1-7).

This reflection on the experience of those gathered is remarkable in the way it points beyond the dialogue itself to a time after the death of Socrates when the community of those who were there lived on through their ongoing conversations. More remarkable still, as Phaedo goes on to emphasize to Echecrates, is the manner in which Socrates was able to transform this unsettling sense of shared distrust into a community rooted in shared λόγοι that is shown to extend beyond his own life. But before we turn to that transformation which occurs on a topological level, we will do well to recognize the way this unsettling sense of distrust is shown to extend beyond the community of those gathered in the cell with Socrates to the person of Echecrates himself.

Plato writes Echecrates back into the story at the moment Phaedo expresses the despair the group experienced. Hearing this, Echecrates is made to say that he too shares now the experience they shared then: “By the gods, Phaedo, I indeed have sympathy with you [συγγνώμην γε ἔχω ὑμῖν]” (*Phd.* 88c8). The eloquently articulated memory of a now dead Socrates is here shown to have tremendous affective power.

But Echecrates responds to this most deeply shared human experience of sickness unto death by reaching out for “some other λόγος as from another beginning that will persuade me that when someone dies, the soul will not die with him” (88d6-8). Yet despite Echecrates’ desire for another argument like those that came before, the words Echecrates receives from Phaedo is a story about the admirable way Socrates, perceiving the profound affect his failed arguments had on those gathered, turned them and rallied them not to give up on λόγοι altogether in the face of this their shared disappointment.

If Phaedo is the simulacrum of the author, Echecrates is the simulacrum of the reader. The affect of Phaedo’s words on Echecrates illustrate the transformative power words can take on when they are oriented toward an ideal. The ideal for Phaedo, as it is for Plato, is Socrates; and although Echecrates is moved by this ideal to a desire for another, more persuasive λόγος, the attentive reader is shown another possibility. For what Plato has Phaedo offer us instead is the story of a Socrates who has relinquished the delusion of absolute certainty in exchange for a “second sailing” in which the assiduous attempt to speak toward the best and most just shows itself capable of moving the community closer to those very ideals.<sup>31</sup>

Here Plato writes for us a palpably human ideal. Socrates, perceiving the suffering of his colleagues, begins to caress the hair on the back of Phaedo’s neck (*Phd.* 85b2-5). The image of this intimate gesture of care moves us even as on a dramatic level the gesture itself was designed to ameliorate the unsettling sense of sickness that had settled upon Phaedo and those gathered. This expression of intimate friendship between Socrates and Phaedo seems to have rallied the community of friends gathered around Socrates and reawakened in them a willingness to talk. Appealing to the heroic tradition in which warriors would not cut their hair before they were victorious, Socrates suggests that Phaedo call on him, as Heracles called upon his nephew, Iolaus, for help in the battle against the λόγος of Simmias and Kebes. He insists that he too will cut his hair if “we are not able to bring the λόγος itself back to life” (89b9-10).<sup>32</sup> Just as in the *Protagoras*, when

31 Socrates speaks famously at the end of his biographical story in the *Phaedo* of the way he, frustrated by his own failed search for the ultimate cause of things, decided he should “take refuge in λόγοι and seek in them the truth of beings” (*Phd.* 99e4-6). This he called his “second sailing” (99c9-d1).

32 Dorter insists that the singular here is significant for he understands the dual objections of Simmias and Kebes as, drawing now on the heroic context in which the discussion unfolds, two heads of a single monster, the monster being misology (*cf.* 86-87). For a different view on this, see Gallop (153). For a discussion of the mythological dimensions of the *Phaedo*, including an argument that the main monster



Socrates suggests that he become Diomedes to Protagoras's Odysseus if it would allow them to continue their dialogue and search for the truth (*Prt.* 348c5-d1), so too here, Socrates appeals to a heroic connection to re-enliven in Phaedo and those there gathered a desire to continue their shared search for the truth.<sup>33</sup> This moment of intimate connection between Socrates and Phaedo, combined with the appeal to a common understanding of heroic friendship, illustrates something of how Socrates, in caring for the individual, is able, precisely through that care, to affect a turning of the entire community.

Appealing to Heracles and Iolaus allows Socrates to draw upon a familiar paradigm of shared endeavor. Once this common sense of work in common is established, Socrates immediately turns his attention to the shared experience they are having and the danger endemic to that experience: misology. For Socrates, there is no greater evil for human beings than for us to become misologues (*Phd.* 89d2-3). Misology arises, says Socrates, like misanthropy, when you repeatedly and “without skill trust someone to excess, and believe that human-being to be in every way true [παντάπασί γε ἀληθῆ] and sound and trustworthy, and then a little later discover that this person is base and untrustworthy” (89d4-5). The issue Socrates identifies here is that of excessive trust, precisely the sort of trust Echecrates was shown to desire most at the beginning and which Phaedo, having learned the Socratic teaching concerning how to avoid misology, knew enough to eschew. The desire for what is “in every way true and sound and trustworthy” must be tempered by a deep humility rooted in the recognition of human finitude. Thus, Socrates goes on to insist:

let's beware of this [the danger that is misology] and let us not admit into the soul [the thought] that there is a chance that there is nothing sound [ὕγιες] in λόγοι; but let us far rather admit that we ourselves are not yet healthy, but must take courage [ἀνδριστέον] and be eager to be sound, you and the others for the sake of your whole life hereafter, me for the sake of death itself. (*Phd.* 90d9-91a1)

A healthy response to the danger of misology requires, according to Socrates, a refusal to admit into the soul the thought that there is nothing sound in λόγοι. This refusal, when combined with the hypothesis that there are ideals worth accepting because they are

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 against which Socrates battles is the Minotaur, understood as the fear of death, and an account of the importance of this images of Heracles and Iolaus, see Klein.

33 Socrates succeed with Phaedo where he failed with Protagoras. For a discussion of this gesture of philosophical friendship between Socrates and Protagoras in the *Protagoras*, see Long (2011b 369-70).

capable of making our lives together better and more just (*Phd.* 101d-e), are the principles that animate the practice of Socratic politics.<sup>34</sup> The refusal to succumb to belief in the radical absence of meaning and the courage to embrace the ideals *as hypotheses* are endeavors undertaken both for the sake of a whole life and, in the face of death, for the sake of a healthy end. Perhaps the need for a certain courage of which Socrates speaks here might be heard together with the courage and passionate excitement (τὴν ἀνδρείαν καὶ τὴν πτοίησιν) Socrates noticed in Hippocrates. For courage in the *Protagoras* came to point to a kind of wisdom such that the courage to be erotically drawn to ideals, the ultimate existence of which remains uncertain, might best be called simply: philosophy. But if philosophy is the courage to be drawn, without illusion, to ideals posited to exist not for the sake of certainty or clarity or assurance, but because it makes a better life possible, then politics is the shared endeavor to speak and act in ways that move our relationships with one another and the community in which we live toward those posited ideals of beauty, justice and the good. Socratic politics is precisely that shared endeavor to live a philosophical life rooted in an erotic desire for those ideals, constituted always by the courage to contest the content they embody.

For Plato, however, Socrates himself serves as the ideal capable of turning those who encounter him in writing toward the question of a shared life informed by a desire for justice and the best. Thus, it is striking and significant that the *Phaedo* does not itself end with the last words of Socrates, but with those of Phaedo. The last words of Socrates, famously, were these: “Crito, we owe a rooster to Asclepius, pay the debt and do not be careless [καὶ μὴ ἀμελήσητε]” (*Phd.* 118a7-8). Whatever else the reference to Asclepius suggests, it implies that Socrates and perhaps those gathered had been healed of the greatest danger, misology. More important, however, is the injunction not to be careless.<sup>35</sup> For the entire dialogue is concerned to cultivate in those gathered a caring practice of death, which has been shown to involve an active endeavor to speak toward the best to and with one another. This is the activity Socrates is shown to practice in the

34 James Wood, in response to Raphael Woolf, captures the proper sense of an hypothesis as Socrates seems to use it in the *Phaedo*. He writes: “This belief [in the Forms and their kinship with the soul] is good and noble because it supports an elevated way of life, a virtuous and philosophical life, *even if* it is merely postulated and never proved, and even if it is not literally believed, but merely upheld as a possibility, a goal, or a regulative ideal. In other words, one should live *as if* it were true, at the same time as one continuously subjects its consequences and applications to investigation and never loses sight of its hypothetical status ([*Phd.*] 101d)” (Wood 22).

35 Laurel Madison rightly emphasizes the importance of these final words of Socrates.

Platonic dialogues, an activity we might now best characterize as the practice of philosophical politics or, indeed, political philosophy. The very last words of the *Phaedo* have, it seems, been crafted to amplify that figure who most palpably embodies the living ideal of political philosophy: Socrates. Thus, Phaedo says finally:

This was the end of our friend, a man, as we might say, who was, among those of that time we experienced, the best and, wholly, the most thoughtful and most just [τῶν τότε ὦν ἐπειράθημεν ἀρίστου καὶ ἄλλως φρονιμωτάτου καὶ δικαιοτάτου]. (118a15-17)

Socrates is said here to be “our friend,” suggesting, indeed, the degree to which Platonic writing itself is designed to cultivate in us not simply a friendship with wisdom, but a friendship with a Socrates “become beautiful and new.” The amplification of this ideal at the end and the eloquent detail Plato fills out in the rest of his dialogues are designed to empower those of us who encounter Socrates in these written texts to live together toward this best, most thoughtful, most just of friends.

### **The Politics of Reading**

If the two letters with which we began opened a space between Plato and the figure of Socrates about whom he writes, the dreams with which we began established the shared Apollonian spirit in which they endeavored to live, the one to speak, the other to write. Those dreams, however, also drew our attention to the alluring elusiveness of Plato himself. The readings we have offered of the *Protagoras* and the *Phaedo* have themselves been animated not by the attempt to capture the swan, but by the courage to be transformed by an active engagement with a way of writing wholly cognizant of its own alluring elusiveness. In this sense, Plato himself is an erotic figure, like Socrates, and indeed, like the ideals of which Socrates spoke and Plato wrote.

To allow our reading to be informed by an erotic desire to discern the truth of the things having been written is to open ourselves to the possibility that the things written might have on us a transformative affect. The habits of reading that have allowed us to discern in these texts the complex transformative power of Socratic saying also cultivate in us capacities that enable us to transform our relations with others and the community in which we live. The activity of reading itself, particularly when it is performed in collaborative dialogue with others –both with those now living and with those who have come before– is political. The politics of reading is rooted primarily in the cultivated capacity that is the hermeneutical imagination. If the imagination is the capacity that enables us to look beyond existing realities to

better and more just modes of relation, the hermeneutical imagination directs our vision toward question of truth. The task of hermeneutics, as Gadamer has suggested, is to transform “the dead trace of meaning” in texts into “living meaning” (164). This requires, of course, that we readers are willing to put ourselves into question in the readings we undertake. To orient our readings toward the truth each text claims to articulate is to enter the very locus of hermeneutics. Gadamer identifies this locus as the space between text and reader, a site determined by “the polarity of familiarity and strangeness” (*id.* 295). The locus of hermeneutics is the topography in which Platonic politics unfolds. Platonic political writing enjoins a politics of reading.

But the hermeneutical imagination cannot be confined to the traditional locus of hermeneutics –the space between reader and text; rather, it extends always beyond texts and our readings of them into our relationships with one another and the world in which we together live. The wider application of the hermeneutical imagination we have cultivated over time, and perhaps even over the period during which you and I have been reading these two Platonic texts together, involves the attempt to respond with integrity and with a concern for what is best to each individual we encounter. Here, Plato’s Socratic ideal again becomes instructive, for through Platonic writing that ideal seems itself to have been able to cultivate in us certain habits of reading capable of opening us to new possibilities of more just relationships with those we encounter. These habits of reading include the ability to listen attentively to that which is written, as Socrates attended always to each individual he encountered. They include as well the courage to speak in a voice of one’s own, as Socrates sought and failed to cultivate in Protagoras. The transformative habits of reading include also the willingness to allow the encounter with the text to reflect back upon the course of one’s own life, as Socrates, appealing to Prometheus, allowed his conversation with Protagoras to reflect upon the whole course of his own life.

If Platonic writing is capable of cultivating in us such transformative habits of reading, the Socratic ideal Plato himself drew and to which he remained forever loyal, must be brought to life again in the way we respond to one another as we attempt to create and sustain together a more just and better world.

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