











ANCIENT QUARREL OR SIBLING RIVALRY?  
RECONCILING PHILOSOPHY AND POETRY IN PLATO

by

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## Abstract

This thesis will attempt to challenge the cogency of Plato's anti-poetry position by dissolving the supposed opposition between philosophy and poetry. By surveying the claims Socrates makes that dismiss poetry and privilege philosophy, we discover that Socrates' antagonism stems from a charge that poetry does not require any discernible skill and is related to an irrational part of the human psyche; conversely, philosophy is superior because it requires a skill (dialectic) and is a strictly rational activity. However, this thesis argues that this is an unfair characterization of both philosophy and poetry. Firstly, we explore how the dialogues themselves undermine Socrates' championing of rationality and *logos*. This will take up the majority of the thesis. Secondly, we reevaluate poetry by turning to Viktor Shklovsky's characterization of poetry, which illuminates the skill of poetry. Finally, we end by illustrating how philosophy and poetry are congruous insofar as they both force the individual to consider new ways of thinking.

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## Table of Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Abstract                                   | ii  |
| Acknowledgments                            | iii |
| Introduction                               | 1   |
| Chapter One                                | 9   |
| 1.1 Introduction                           | 9   |
| 1.2 Poetry in <i>Ion</i>                   | 10  |
| 1.3 Poetry and Morality in <i>Republic</i> | 15  |
| 1.4 Metaphysics and Poetry                 | 19  |
| 1.5 A New Approach to Plato                | 25  |
| 1.6 Summary                                | 42  |
| Chapter Two                                | 44  |
| 2.1 Introduction                           | 44  |
| 2.2 <i>Phaedrus</i>                        | 46  |
| 2.3 On Writing                             | 52  |
| 2.4 <i>Symposium</i>                       | 61  |
| 2.5 Summary                                | 76  |
| Chapter 3                                  | 78  |
| 3.1 Introduction                           | 78  |
| 3.2 "Art as Technique"                     | 80  |
| 3.3 <i>Meno</i>                            | 87  |
| 3.4 Summary                                | 100 |

|            |     |
|------------|-----|
| Conclusion | 102 |
|------------|-----|

## Introduction

This thesis will investigate the relationship between Platonic philosophy and poetry. There is a historical reading of Plato as being anti-literature. For example, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche accuses Socrates of killing tragedy with his excessive emphasis on reason and rationality: "Consider the consequences of the Socratic maxims: 'Virtue is knowledge; man sins only from ignorance; he who is virtuous is happy.' In these three basic forms of optimism lies the death of tragedy" (91). As well, in *The Fire and the Sun*, Iris Murdoch goes to great lengths to build a defence of art against Plato's claims. In fact, there are numerous examples of Plato berating poets for lacking reason. Here are but a few:

Socrates: I decided that it was not wisdom that enabled them to write their poetry, but a kind of instinct or inspiration, such as you find in seers and prophets who deliver all their sublime messages without knowing in the least what they mean. It seemed clear to me that the poets were in much the same case, and I also observed that the very fact that they were poets made them think that they had a perfect understanding of all other subjects, of which they were totally ignorant. (*Apology* 22c)

Socrates: And what is the aim of that stately and marvellous creature, tragic drama? Is it her endeavour and ambition, in your opinion, merely to gratify the spectators; or, if there be anything pleasant and charming, but evil, to struggle

against uttering it, but to declaim and sing anything that is unwelcome but beneficial, whether they like it or not? For which of these two aims do you think tragic poetry is equipped?

Callicles: It is quite evident, Socrates, that her impulse is rather toward pleasure and the gratification of the spectators. (*Gorgias* 502b-c)

Athenian: 'Tis an old story, legislator, which we poets are always telling with the universal approval of the rest of the world, that when a poet takes his seat on the Muse's tripod, his judgment takes leave of him. He is like a fountain which gives free course to the rush of its waters, and since representation is of the essence of his art, must often contradict his own utterances in his presentations of contrasted characters, without knowing whether the truth is on the side of this speaker or that. (*Laws* 719c)

Athenian: Now what principle, we may ask, did that statement illustrate? Was not the implication that poets are not quite the most competent judges of good and evil? Hence a poet who goes wrong in language or melody on this point – that of praying for the wrong thing – will of course lead our citizens to transgress our regulations in their prayers for things of supreme moment, though, as we just said, it would be hard to find a more serious error. Shall we then add another typical regulation about music to this effect?

Clinias: But to what effect? We should be glad of a clearer statement.

Athenian: No poet shall compose anything in contravention of the public standards of law and right, honor and good, nor shall he be at liberty to display any composition to any private citizen whatsoever until he has first submitted it to the appointed censors of such matters and the curators of law, and obtained their approval. These censors we have to all intents appointed by our election of legislations for music and superintendent of education. (*Laws* 801b-d)

From these excerpts we can observe a general trend: poetry lacks a definable skill, and must be curtailed because it stimulates a part of the psyche that is irrational, which can be detrimental to citizens. These two criticisms of poetry are specifically explored in *Ion* and *Republic*. In *Ion*, Socrates claims that poets have no *technē*<sup>1</sup> and are merely inspired by the Muses, and concludes that poets have no real knowledge. And in *Republic*, Socrates goes so far as to ban various forms of poetry from the Kallipolis for being dangerous for the moral education of the populous.

Socrates' problem with poetry is epistemic, moral, and metaphysical. As explained in *Timaeus*, the material world is an imitation of the intelligible world of the Good/Forms. It is the job of the dialectic to break us from our opinions and beliefs informed by our sensual perceptions and proceed towards the intelligible forms and

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<sup>1</sup> *Technē* can be translated as art, skill, cunning of hand. In the translation of *Ion* by Lane Cooper, which I am referencing, *technē* is often translated as art.



knowledge, as Socrates explains in *Republic* using the Line and Cave analogies. Since poetry is mimetic, according to Socrates, it therefore represents a representation and is thus two steps away from reality. Socrates concludes that philosophy is superior because it employs a *techne* (the dialectic) and is able to impart real knowledge (the Forms<sup>2</sup>). However, this is not necessarily the case. For one thing, many of Plato's dialogues end in *aporia*, which is to say there is no satisfactory conclusion. Despite their rigorous application of the dialectic, Socrates and his interlocutors rarely achieve an incontestable definition of whatever virtue they are discussing. *Laches*' inability to define courage and *Theatetus*' to define knowledge are two examples of *aporetic* dialogues that show the problem of definition. Drawing also from the *Seventh Letter*, we conclude that the Forms are non-discursive, and trying to discuss them is not as straightforward as Socrates seems to suggest.

However, *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* show us ways to discuss the Forms despite their non-discursiveness. *Phaedrus* is of particular interest because it both problematizes many of Socrates' arguments in *Ion* and *Republic* and sheds some light on the way in which the dialogues are written. Firstly, in *Phaedrus*, Socrates actually praises irrationality and argues for its role in contributing to knowledge, vis-à-vis *eros* and the process of recollection. Secondly, we get a critique of writing, as Socrates illustrates its inability to directly convey the ideas of the author. Referring to the *Second Letter*, we see how Plato takes Socrates' points into consideration and is able to take the risk of writing

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<sup>2</sup> The relationship between knowledge and the Forms will be discussed in detail later in Chapter 1.

by using the form of the dialogue, as opposed to that of a treatise or essay. Accordingly, *Symposium* provides us with a sort of case study to observe how Plato writes philosophy. All the false starts and dead ends of the various interlocutors culminate in Diotima's speech, which demonstrates the non-discursive *telos* of the dialectic by further building on *Phaedrus*' points about *eros* and recollection.

Platonic dialogues must therefore be approached holistically in order to see the forest for the trees. Once Socrates' arguments are understood within the full frame of the dialogue it becomes evident that it is not so much the arguments themselves that Plato is trying make explicit but rather the method of argumentation. The goal of the dialogues is to question the nature of knowledge itself and to challenge the notion that we indeed have full knowledge of concepts such as justice, beauty, courage, etc. Each dialogue follows a progression in which the speakers first identify a concept as their subject of discussion. Different speakers offer various definitions that Socrates then in turn picks apart and disproves. Plato thus illustrates that concepts cannot be understood with words only. The true nature of a concept exists within the ideal realm of the Forms, which can only be shared intuitively. This is the Platonic dialectic. It brings language to its breaking point and shows us that our understanding of concepts can never be taken for granted.

Likewise, poetry is also capable of disarming our notions of fixity in language by virtue of the defamiliarizing effect of poetic language. Viktor Shklovsky asserts that the technique of poetry is to break our habitual experience of objects by rendering them

unfamiliar. Poetry uses language that is metaphoric and difficult, which challenges the reader. The reader is thus forced to reconsider the object. This method is similar to Socrates' *elenctic* method as seen in *Meno*, wherein Meno compares Socrates to a stingray who "numbs" his audience. Thus, according to Shklovsky, poetic language defamiliarizes our perception of language and in turn challenges our notions of fixity in meaning and being. Socrates' ontological criticism of poetry as a representation of a representation is therefore incomplete because poetry is not only mimetic. Whether or not poetry is just a copy of a copy does not matter because the purpose of art is not merely to represent nature, but as Shklovsky states, to defamiliarize. Defamiliarization is thus poetry's *techné*. In a sense one can engage in dialectic with a work of art. A work can defamiliarize and challenge a reader. In turn, as the reader interprets the text, s/he begins to come up with different answers and responses, which can then be challenged again. Poetry is therefore analogous to Plato's dialectic in that it breaks the reader from his/her habitual experience and forces him/her to reconsider various ideas. Art can thus contribute to the Platonic project of deconstructing preconceived notions of truth and lead the thinker towards the Forms/the Good. The "ancient quarrel" between poetry and art that Socrates alludes to at 697b is thus a misnomer and the effect produced via the experience of art is in fact congruous with the Platonic dialectic.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> They are congruous as they both achieve that important first step of breaking with habit. In his essay, Shklovsky does not move beyond that first step, emphasizing the legitimacy of defamiliarization's impact. Plato, of course, goes further and builds an epistemology around the subsequent steps. However, this latter point is beyond the purview of this thesis, as we will be focusing on that initial point of defamiliarization.

This thesis will seek to dissolve the supposed quarrel between philosophy and poetry. We will see that a quarrel only exists insofar as philosophy and poetry are unjustly characterized. The majority of this thesis will be dedicated to a more just and consequently less quarrelsome characterization. More specifically, we will deconstruct the notion that philosophy is about defining concepts and Forms by reducing them to *logoi*.<sup>4</sup> Rather, as is our contention, Plato sees philosophy as searching for the method(s) or way(s) of thinking about and/or understating the Forms or philosophical notions. Once this has been established, we will have opened a space for poetry to come onto the scene. Poetry, this thesis will argue, is about representing a subject such that the reader is forced to reconsider his/her ideas about it. Therefore, if there is a quarrel between philosophy and poetry, it is a sibling rivalry.

The first chapter will explore the various claims that Socrates makes about poetry in *Ion* and *Republic*. We will also draw on *Timaeus* to supplement the metaphysical considerations of *Republic*. Ultimately, we will draw out the epistemic, moral, and metaphysical critiques that Socrates launches against poetry. After these expository sections, we take a more critical approach to Socrates' claims about philosophy, and turn

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<sup>4</sup> *Logos* can be translated as "computation," "reckoning," or "pertaining to reason." It is the origin of the modern term "logic," which the Oxford Dictionary defines as "The branch of philosophy that treats of the forms of thinking in general, and more especially of inference and of scientific method [...] a formal system using symbolic techniques and mathematical methods to establish truth-values in the physical sciences, in language, and in philosophical argument."

towards the *Seventh Letter* to help make sense of the inconsistencies and contradictions that are inherent in *Republic*, concluding that the Forms are non-discursive and cannot be reduced to a *logos*. The first chapter concludes with a sort of *aporia*; if the Forms are non-discursive and dialectic is discursive then how do we arrive at any conclusions? How do we do philosophy?

Accordingly, chapter two will attempt to resolve this issue by analyzing *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. In the section on *Phaedrus*, we introduce the concept of *eros*, and the way irrationality can contribute to philosophical considerations. We then go into greater detail on *Phaedrus*' discussion of writing and how it provides insight into Plato's writing, drawing also on the *Second Letter*. What we discern is that Plato is able to do philosophy in light of non-discursiveness. We then move into the *Symposium*. Our analysis of *Symposium* is twofold. At once, it completes the discussion of *eros* and its contribution to knowledge and philosophy. Secondly, it provides a case study for the points made in *Phaedrus* about writing.

In chapter three, we return to poetry with Shklovsky's essay "Art as Technique". We explore Shklovsky's concepts of algebrization and defamiliarization. Shklovsky gives us a conception of poetry that is not merely mimetic. We then move onto *Meno* to explore the ways in which defamiliarization and dialectic are congruous. We conclude that philosophy and poetry do similar work insofar as they force the individual to consider new ways of thinking.

## Chapter One

### 1.1 Introduction

The first three sections of this chapter, “Poetry in *Ion*”, “Poetry and Morality in *Republic*”, and “Metaphysics and Poetry”, will survey the key criticisms that Socrates makes against poetry. In *Ion* and *Republic*, we see Socrates’ most hostile remarks about poetry. In *Ion*, Socrates argues that poetry cannot be considered a *techné* because it is a product of emotion and inspiration, not of knowledge. Then, in *Republic*, Socrates details his issues regarding the form and content of poetry, and why poetry must be strictly censored if it is to have a place in the Kallipolis. However, Socrates’ strongest argument against poetry stems from his metaphysical conviction that poetry is essentially mimetic, and is thus twice removed from reality, i.e. the Forms. Taken together we conclude that Socrates is opposed to poetry because it is not a *techné*, and is therefore lacking a *logos*, and that it cannot represent any type of knowledge as it is so far removed from the Forms. Likewise, philosophy is superior because it can provide a *logos*, and can direct the individual towards considering the Forms.

However, the final section of this chapter, “A New Approach to Plato”, reveals that a closer reading of the dialogues betrays Socrates’ confidence in philosophy’s supposed ability to provide a *logos*. We see this manifested in the dissatisfaction of Socrates’ interlocutors and the unsatisfactory conclusions of the *aporetic* dialogues. The problem, as the *Seventh Letter* explains, is language. Language is incapable of

representing the Forms. As a result, knowledge of the Forms is non-discursive. By non-discursive, we mean knowledge that cannot be expressed in propositions and must be achieved obliquely, either through figurative language, implication, etc. Conversely, by discursive, we mean knowledge that can be expressed in propositions or syllogisms. The issue is that the Forms cannot be expressed with discursive language; they cannot be reduced to a set of predicates. Discursive language is divided whereas the Forms are undivided. Therefore we must use language in a non-discursive fashion that gestures towards the Forms. This is significant because it challenges Socrates' points about the goals of philosophy, and why it is supposedly superior to poetry.

## 1.2 Poetry in *Ion*

It is no surprise that readers label Plato as anti-literature. In *Ion*, Socrates goes so far as to say poetry is not even a *technē*. *Technē*, according to Socrates, belongs to the realm of knowledge, whereas poetry is a product of emotion and divination. The physician has his/her *technē*, even the sculptor, in the sense that they seem to know how to bring about an intended effect using various techniques, but not the poet. Whenever Plato writes about poetry he uses the nouns *epipnoia*<sup>5</sup> or *mimesis*<sup>6</sup>, but never *technē*. Socrates has two principle arguments to prove his point that poetry is not a *technē*. His first argument is that the “*technē*” of the poet is derived from inspiration, not from knowledge or technique. Socrates treats poetry as a matter of mania or *entheos*, meaning

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<sup>5</sup> “Breathing upon,” or “inspiration”

<sup>6</sup> “Imitation”

“full of god,” inspired, or possessed (Rijksbaron 9). Socrates compares Ion and the poets to Euripides’ “stone of Heraclea,” a powerful magnet (533d).<sup>7</sup> The magnet works to attract a long chain of iron rings. The loadstone, the original magnetic force, imparts its magnetism unto each iron ring, which then in turn attracts another ring, forming a chain, each mimicking the other. Socrates compares this loadstone to the Muse. “She first makes men inspired,” explains Socrates, “and then through these inspired ones others share in the enthusiasm, and a chain is formed, for the epic poets, all the good ones, have their excellence, not from art, but are inspired, possessed, and thus they utter all these admirable poems” (534a).<sup>8</sup> Poets therefore do not have a *techné*, “for a poet is a light and winged thing, and holy, and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself, and reason is no longer in him” (534b). Consequently, Socrates reasons, these are not the words of the poet, but of the Gods who speak through the poets, using them as “ministers” (534d). Finally, the last ring is the audience. The loadstone is the Muse or God, the first ring is the poet, the second is the rhapsode, and the last is the spectator listening to the rhapsode’s or actor’s performance (536a). Socrates characterizes this movement as a form of possession. The poet, rhapsode, and audience are all possessed by the God or Muse (536b).

In *Republic*, it becomes evident why Socrates is wary of such a relationship.

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<sup>7</sup> It is ironic that Socrates should dismiss poetry and then immediately refer to a poetic example to prove his point.

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting that Socrates qualifies these as “the good ones,” given his negative view of poetry in general. In *Phaedrus* we shall see Socrates return to the idea of inspiration in a more positive tone, even linking inspiration with Philosophy and dialectic.



Socrates asks:

And do you not also give the name dialectician to the man who is able to exact an account of the essence of each thing? And will you not say that the one who is unable to do this, in so far as he incapable of rendering an account to himself and others, does not possess full reason and intelligence about the matter? [...] And is not this true of the good likewise – that the man who is unable to define in his discourse and distinguish and abstract from all other things the aspect or idea of the good, and who cannot, as it were in battle, running the gauntlet of all tests, and striving to examine everything by essential reality and not by opinion, hold on his way through all this without tripping in his reasoning – the man who lacks this power, you will say, does not really know the good itself or any particular good, but if he apprehends any adumbration of it, his contact with it is by opinion, not by knowledge and dreaming and dozing through his present life, before he awakens here he will arrive at the house of Hades and fall asleep forever? (534b-d)

Socrates insists that in order for something to be considered knowledge, it must be accompanied by a *logos*. The purpose of philosophy, so says Socrates, is to achieve knowledge rationally and discursively. Socrates is not dismissing the Gods or Muses in *Ion*, but he seems to be suggesting that this method of knowledge, divine dispensation,

needs to be transcended or overcome, that there needs to be a better method to arrive at truth. The philosopher is not satisfied with mere imagery; a philosophical justification will have its basis in the universalizing quality of rationality (Dorter 32). In the *Theatetus*, Socrates tells Theatetus, “Just as you found a single character to embrace all that multitude, so now try to find a single formula that applies to the many kinds of knowledge” (148d). The challenge of the *Theatetus* is to explain the *logos* that makes opinions knowledge. Socrates will assist Theatetus by using his skill as a “midwife”: “the highest point of my art is the power to prove by every test whether the offspring of a young man’s thought is a false phantom or instinct with life and truth” (150c). Socrates’ *techne* is his method of testing an interlocutor’s hypothesis to see whether it is capable of providing the *logos* whereby the opinion could be knowledge. And according to *Ion*, poetry cannot give us that.<sup>9</sup>

Socrates’ second argument is that there are no judges of poetry. Socrates raises the issue of expertise and explains how a physician is able to judge who is the most knowledgeable out of a group of speakers discussing medicine because that physician understands health and the technique of medicine. Conversely, while many poets speak differently on similar subject matters, Ion is unable to judge who speaks the best; he can only comment on Homer (532). Socrates thus concludes, “it is plain to everyone that not from art and knowledge comes your power to speak concerning Homer. If it were art that

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<sup>9</sup> However, the *Theatetus* ends in a characteristic *aporia* as Socrates and Theatetus are unable to define knowledge and its necessary conditions. Moreover, as we shall see further in chapter 2, in dialogues such as *Phaedrus*, Socrates in fact praises irrationality and raises it above rationality.

gave you power, then you could speak about all the other poets as well” (532c).<sup>10</sup> One is tempted to dismiss Socrates’ criticism here as more of a charge against rhapsodes and not against poets, but Socrates then goes on to criticize poets for being unable to distinguish their “art” from others, and for speaking on subjects on which they possess no expertise (537-8). Socrates lists a number of different techniques that Homer describes such as charioteering, fishing, and warfare, yet the poet/rhapsode is an authority on none of these (538-40).<sup>11</sup> In *Republic*, Socrates states:

Yet still he will nonetheless imitate, though in every case he does not know in what way the thing is bad or good. But, as it seems, the thing he will imitate will be the thing that appears beautiful to the ignorant multitude [...] On this, then, as it seems, we are fairly well agreed, that the imitator knows nothing worth mentioning of the things he imitates, but that imitation is a form of play, not to be taken seriously, and that those who attempt tragic poetry, whether in iambic or heroic verse, are all together imitators. (602b)

Socrates’ goal here is to show that making poems is not evidence of any sort of knowledge or ability, and that poets write whatever they like on any subject they like without having to be held accountable for what they write (Rijksbaron 10-11). Therefore,

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<sup>10</sup> Socrates’ points are not much different than Immanuel Kant’s. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant comments on the phenomenon of art being a technique with rules without concepts; on how the poet, or genius, is able to create products according to rules that are groundless.

<sup>11</sup> One is tempted to suggest rhetoric, but that is left to the Sophists.

there is no technique for the poet like medicine is for the doctor, but when Socrates does make reference to something like a poetic technique he uses the noun “mimesis” (Rijksbaron 9). This is why Socrates refers to Ion and the rhapsodes as “interpreters of interpreters” (535). If the above is correct, as Rijksbaron asserts, *Ion* is a part of Plato’s program or agenda to show that poetry, being mimetic of the imperfect, material world, should be rejected and not be allowed in the state (Rijksbaron 13).

### **1.3 Poetry and Morality in *Republic***

In *Republic*, we see Socrates take an even more antagonistic stance towards poetry, expanding on his notion of poetry as mimetic, and why it should be curtailed within the well-governed state. Here, we see Socrates’ moral critique of poetry insofar as censoring poetry will ensure a more lawful state. Essentially, since poetry is mimetic, Socrates fears that audiences will be inspired to imitate wrongful behaviour. Socrates declares:

We will beg Homer and the other poets not to be angry if we cancel those and all similar passages, not that they are not poetic and pleasing to most hearers, but because the more poetic they are the less they are suited to the ears of boys and men [...] (387b)

To illustrate his issue with poetry and why its presence in the Kallipolis must be curtailed, Socrates details his problems with both the content and form of poetry.

In regards to content, we see all the emendations that Socrates makes to Hesiod and Homer. In Book Two, Socrates begins discussing how the guardians will be educated. First they will begin with “false” stories. By that he means poetic tales of the gods and heroes (376c-377a). However:

We must begin, then, it seems, by a censorship over our story-makers, and what they do well we must pass and what not, reject. And the stories on the accepted list we will induce nurses and mothers to tell to the children and so shape their souls by these stories far rather than their bodies by their hands. But most of the stories they now tell we must reject. (377c)

The myths will be manipulated to foster in children the four virtues: wisdom, courage, self-control, and justice (Dorter 75). Some of Socrates’ suggestions ought to raise an eyebrow for many contemporary readers; such as making “taboo in these matters the entire vocabulary of terror and fear” because they want guardians that do not fear death, especially in battle (386c); or his urge to omit the passage in *The Iliad* where Achilles laments the death of Patroclus because such emotions are “unworthy” (388a-d).<sup>12</sup> Socrates’ point is that there are the types of behaviour that the Guardians must not imitate.

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<sup>12</sup> My personal favorite is 388e: “Again, they [the narrative characters/protagonists] must not be prone to laughter. For ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter his condition provokes a violent reaction.”

Socrates's criticism of poetry reflects his metaphysics. Specifically, it speaks to his privileging of unity over multiplicity. In 393a, Socrates distinguishes between imitation and narration. To explain the former, Socrates refers to the passage in the *Iliad* in which Chryses implores Agamemnon to release Briseis. According to Socrates, Homer delivers the lines "as if he were himself Chryses and tries as far as may be to make us feel that not Homer is the speaker, but the priest, an old man" (393b). Therefore, if the writer is writing through the perspective of a character, s/he is imitating. Conversely, "if the poet should conceal himself nowhere, then his entire poetizing and narration would have been accomplished without imitation" (393d). Socrates explains, "there is one kind of poetry and tale-telling which works wholly through imitation, as you remarked, tragedy and comedy, and another which employs the recital of the poet himself, best exemplified, I presume, in the dithyramb, and there is again that which employs both, in epic poetry" (394c). Socrates must then decide what kind of poet he will allow in the Kallipolis. It is important to note that Socrates is – rather dogmatically – claiming that an individual cannot "imitate many things well as he can one" (394e). For instance, he claims that a poet cannot succeed in both tragedy and comedy.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, Socrates sticks to his assertion and argues that the guardians cannot be allowed to mimic anything that is not conducive to becoming "expert craftsmen of civic liberty" (397c).<sup>14</sup> But, if they were to

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<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare is an obvious counter-example to this point.

<sup>14</sup> It is interesting that Socrates makes a point of treating civic liberty as a craft. In the dialogues, we see that virtues are more than *techné*, they are ideas, Forms. Perhaps in the case of the Guardians, they are strictly enforcing laws that are determined by the Philosopher Kings, which is to say they are not capable of

imitate, they must imitate what is proper, and this is where we see all the edits, amendments, and censorship of literature that Socrates champions. For example, Socrates suggests that Hesiod's account of Ouranos' castration at the hands of his son, Kronos, should not be taught to the youth, and should be either censored or shown only to a select few readers (377e-378a).

Socrates then observes that there is a virtuous form of diction and an unvirtuous form of diction. He asserts that a good man will identify with a virtuous character and have no trouble in mimicking such an individual, whereas he would not be willing to mimic an unvirtuous character (396e). Accordingly, "the narrative that he will employ will be of the kind that we just now illustrated by the verses of Homer, and his diction will be one that partakes of both, of imitation and simple narration, but there will be a small portion of imitation in a long discourse" (396e). Socrates is thus willing to concede a certain degree of mimicry, but it must be in keeping with virtuous behaviour and character.<sup>15</sup> We can see that Socrates has a very paternalistic attitude towards the Guardians; they are childish in the sense that they must be carefully monitored lest they are exposed to something that may jeopardize their development. Likewise, as Socrates sees imitation as a form of play (602b), he allows the Guardians to engage in it somewhat, as long as it is appropriate play. Furthermore, this does little to soften Plato's

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engaging in the kind of philosophical discussion of Forms, etc. In modern terminology, we can frame this as a distinction between following the "letter of the law" vs. "the spirit of the law."

<sup>15</sup> The irony is that Plato is one of the greatest imitators in Philosophy or Literature. At no point does Plato reveal himself as the narrator; it is always through the perspective of Socrates and various interlocutors.

reputation as anti-poetry, for poetry is still treated as mimesis, which according to Socrates is merely play.

#### **1.4 Metaphysics and Poetry**

We now shift towards the metaphysical critique of poetry. Predominately, Socrates has two principle ontological problems with poetry: firstly, Socrates dismisses types of poetry that have a multitude of voices; he prefers a singular authoritative voice. Secondly, and more importantly, since poetry is an imitation of the sensual world, it is twice removed from the Forms.

In regards to the former, Socrates makes the point of distinguishing narration as unmixed whereas imitation is mixed. Narration “involve[s] slight variations, and if we assign a suitable pitch and rhythm to the diction [...] the right speaker speaks almost on the same note and in one cadence [...] and similarly in a rhythm of nearly the same kind” (397c). Conversely, imitation requires “every kind of pitch and all rhythms, if it too is to have appropriate expression, since it involves manifold forms of variation” (397c). Thus, the “unmixed imitator of the good” is permitted access to the Kallipolis. This is echoed in Socrates’ discussion of grace and gracelessness, which states, “gracelessness and evil rhythm and disharmony are akin to evil speaking and the evil temper, but the opposites are the symbols and the kin of the opposites, the sober and good disposition” (401a). Socrates is clearly adamant about harmony and unity. And for this reason, Socrates affirms that not only poetry but also all forms of art must be censured in order to ensure



that none portrays discordant forms. Yet the narration itself is told as a recollection from the point of view of Socrates, so the story is literally a multitude of voices contained in one.

Likewise, Socrates asserts, “education in music is most sovereign,” (401e) for harmony and rhythm are most plainly expressed therein. Plato then draws a strong connection between harmony and virtue. Socrates states:

am I not right in saying that by the same token we shall never be true musicians [...] until we are able to recognize the forms of soberness, courage, liberality, and high-mindedness, and all their kindred and their opposites, too, in all the combinations that contain and convey them, and to apprehend them and their images wherever found, disregarding them neither in trifles nor in great things, but believing the knowledge of them to belong to the same art and discipline. (402c)

The knowledge of harmony and rhythm clearly extends beyond just musical theory. According to Socrates, harmony, rhythm, and the virtues are all manifestations of the Good. Socrates explains, “the man whose mind is truly fixed on eternal realities [...] fixes his gaze upon the things of the eternal and unchanging order, and seeing that they [...] all abide in harmony as reason bids, he will endeavor to imitate them and, as far as may be, to fashion himself in their likeness and assimilate himself to them” (500c). By

censuring art the way he does, Socrates is thus trying to maximize any potential for inculcating the Good.<sup>16</sup>

Socrates' discussion of harmony over dissonance and unmixed over mixed illustrates a rejection of multiplicity for unity. We see this in his metaphysics, which states that the sensible (the physical) is an imperfect imitation of the ideal (the rational). We can see Socrates' privileging unity over multiplicity most explicitly in *Timaeus*. Herein, Timaeus posits intelligibility first, which the Demiurge then imposes on disorderly matter. Timaeus begins by drawing a distinction between the ideal world, which is fixed and unchanging, and the physical world, which is in a constant state of becoming. Timaeus asserts that the world was "Created [...] being visible and tangible and having a body, and therefore sensible, and all sensible things are apprehended by opinion and sense, and are in a process of creation and created" (28b-c). Accordingly, "everything that becomes or is created must of necessity be created by some cause, for without a cause nothing can be created" (28a). The physical world, according to Timaeus, is a copy of the original, perfect world. Timaeus explains how, "God desired that all things should be good and nothing bad [...] Wherefore also finding the whole visible sphere not at rest, but moving in an irregular and disorderly fashion, out of disorder he brought order, considering that this was in every way better than the other" (30a). The

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<sup>16</sup> At this point, it is tempting to view Socrates' utilitarian usage of poetry for education/propaganda as an avenue for poetry to be consistent with Platonic philosophy. However, thus far, Socrates' discussion of poetry is based on an understanding of poetry as solely mimetic in nature, which I will argue in Chapter 3 is incomplete.

Demiurge used the ideal world of forms as the template to fashion the physical world as a copy. There is some ambiguity here as to whether there was already a physical world that the Demiurge fashions, or whether the Demiurge both created and shaped the physical world. Aristotle believes the latter, but most assert the former (Taylor 442-3). Gilles Deleuze asserts, "The important point is that the divisible is defined as that which bears in itself the unequal, where as the indivisible (the Same or the One) seeks to impose an equality upon it, and thereby render it docile" (233). Thus we can surmise that, on the one hand, there is the Demiurge and the forms, and, on the other, a chaotic world of matter. Whether God created matter, or whether matter already existed and the Demiurge comes on the scene to "render it docile" is a matter of interpretation.

The Demiurge, filling the world with various beings to complete the universe's unity, creates the stars, which, according to Timaeus, are minor Gods. To these he delegates the responsibility of creating the rest of the animals, including man. The Demiurge commands the Gods:

Three tribes of mortal beings remain to be created – without them the universe will be incomplete, or it will not contain every kind of animal which it ought to contain, if it is to be perfect. On the other hand, if they were created by me and received life at my hands, they would be on an equality with the gods. In order then that they may be mortal, and that this universe may be truly universal, do ye, according to your natures, betake

yourselves to the formation of animals, imitating the power which was shown by me in creating you. (41c)

Man is thus a mix of immortality and mortality. They are created in the form of the Demiurge and the Gods, but because they were not actually created by the Demiurge himself, man is subpar to the Gods. Why the Demiurge needed Man, or any of the other animals, Timaeus is not entirely specific; he simply states that the Demiurge needs all these creatures in order that universe be complete. Timaeus asserts, "the creation of the world is the combined work of necessity and mind. Mind, the ruling power, persuaded necessity to bring the greater part of created things to perfection, and thus and after this manner in the beginning, through necessity made subject to reason, this universe was created" (47e-48a). Why Timaeus personifies mind and necessity is difficult to say, but it appears that the Demiurge fashioned matter according to the necessity of form's reason. That said, "if a person will truly tell of the way in which the work was accomplished, he must include the variable cause as well, and explain its influence" (48a). This "variable cause" is the third principle in the *Timaeus*' triadic ontology. Timaeus defines it as "the receptacle, and in a manner, the nurse of all generation" (49b). The system is as follows: "first, that which is in process of generation; secondly, that in which the generation takes place; and thirdly, that of which the thing generated is a resemblance naturally produced. And we may liken the receiving principle to a mother, and the source or spring to a father, and the intermediate nature to a child" (50d). The receptacle is composed of the four elements: earth, water, wind, and fire. The elements never present themselves in the

same form and thus cannot be labeled demonstratively as “this” or “that,” but only “as such.” This receptacle is matter and is formless (50a). The four elements of the receptacle (mother) were disorderly and the Demiurge (father) imposed form and measure to the best of his ability and created the universe (the child). But, because the elements were not perfect like the forms, the child is a deformed and derivative copy of the father (52b-c). God creates order out of chaos, but given the nature of the chaotic elements, order cannot fully be achieved. Deleuze explains the Demiurge’s process in a mocking tone:

He has equalized the divisible in this extension which is the extension of the Soul of the world, but underneath, at the deepest layer of the divisible, the unequal still rumbles in intensity. This is of little consequence to God, for he fills the entire expanse of the soul with extensity of bodies and their qualities. He covers everything. Nevertheless, he dances upon a volcano. Never have so many, so diverse and such demented operations been multiplied in order to draw from the depths of an intensive *spatium* a serene and docile extensity, and to dispel a Difference which subsists in itself even when it is cancelled outside itself. (233-4)

*Timaeus* performs numerous operations trying to tame the wild formlessness of the Mother; however, it remains nonetheless. Of course, this is not even Socrates speaking –

it is Timaeus, a Pythagorean – so it is doubly difficult to ascertain how much Plato agrees.

Nonetheless, the relationship between the ideal and the physical in the *Timaeus* is congruous with Socrates' metaphysical points in *Republic*. In Book Ten of *Republic*, Socrates describes how art is in fact twice removed from reality as it is copying copies and thus cannot offer any substantial knowledge. This charge stems from Plato's metaphysics, which states that universals exist within an ideological realm of Forms that can only be experienced rationally. The objects we perceive within the extended, physical world are only imitations or representations of the forms. Since, as Socrates explains, poetry is composed by representing the objects of the physical world, the poet is therefore "in his nature three removes from the king and the truth" (597e). Socrates thus concludes that all representation, or mimesis, "produces a product that is far removed from truth [...] and associates with the part in us that is remote from intelligence, and is its companion and friend for no sound and true purpose" (603b). The latter charge recalls Socrates' point in *Ion*, but the former, more metaphysical criticism is unique to *Republic* and represents Socrates/Plato's most systematic attack against poetry.

### 1.5 A New Approach to Plato

While at this point it may seem that Platonic philosophy is irrevocably anti-poetry, the reader must first recognize that Socrates has an open mind about the construction of the Kallipolis and is willing to entertain the possibility of the study of

literature. Socrates states that he would allow “advocates who are not poets but lovers of poetry to plead her cause in prose without meter, and show that she is not only delightful but beneficial to orderly government and all the life of man” (607d). Secondly, one must be careful not to assume that the Kallipolis is actually Plato’s ideal city as is historically suggested. In Book Eight of *Republic*, Socrates in fact describes how the Kallipolis will ultimately deteriorate. He states, “Hard in truth it is for a state thus constituted to be shaken and disturbed, but since for everything that has come into being destruction is appointed, not even such a fabric as this will abide for all time, but it shall surely be dissolved” (546a). Therefore, considering these two points, it is clear that Plato’s rejection of literature is not carved in stone and there is potential for some flexibility. In this section we will consider passages of *Republic* and the *Seventh Letter* that destabilize Socrates’ literal claims about philosophy and poetry. We conclude that the Forms are non-discursive, which throws Socrates’ supposed project of definition and knowledge into limbo.

So, if the Kallipolis is unsustainable then what is the point of Socrates going through the trouble of building it from the ground up only to tear it down? We should remember, at this point, that Plato’s primary goal in *Republic* is not a depiction of the ideal state, but to answer the question, “What is justice?” Socrates reasons that if they could construct the perfect city then they would be able to observe justice in its purest form and thus derive a satisfactory definition from it:

But now let us work out the inquiry in which we supposed that, if we found some larger thing that contained justice and viewed it there, we should more easily discover its nature in the individual man. And we agreed that this larger thing is the city, and so we constructed the best city in our power, well knowing that in the good city it would of course be found. What, then, we thought we saw there must refer back to the individual and, if it is confirmed, all will be well [...] Then a just man too will not differ at all from a just city in respect of the very form of justice, but will be like it. (434e-435b)

Nonetheless, *Republic* finishes in *aporia* without a hard and fast definition of justice. At 433b, Socrates claims, "This, then, I said, my friend, if taken in a certain sense appears to be justice, this principle of doing one's own business." This of course begs the question, how do we establish whether one's business is indeed justified? From 429 to 433, Socrates discusses how the lower forms of nature (sensual, spirited) must be reined in by the higher (the rational), which is then applied to the state to suggest that the *hoi polloi* and the Guardians must be governed by the Philosopher Kings. But who watches the watchmen? A definition of justice as "doing one's business" is hardly capable of handling the complex problems of the state. If one were to define being a ruler as keeping the state in peace and order then one can use all sorts of unjust means (policy brutality, surveillance, etc.) to justify the end. To determine whether the Philosopher Kings are doing their job properly would require an appeal to the concept of justice, but if the



concept is understood as “doing one’s business” then the argument becomes circular. However, Socrates states, “A pattern [...] was what we wanted when we were inquiring into the nature of ideal justice and asking what would be the character of the perfectly just man [...] We wished to fix our eyes upon them as types and models [...] Our purpose was not to demonstrate the possibility of the realization of these ideals” (472c). Socrates’ goal was to fashion an image of the ideal state so that they may behold justice in action; achieving a hard and fast definition of justice was never really an option for him. And this is all part of Plato’s dialectical method.

In the *Seventh Letter* Plato states:

For everything that exists there are three classes of objects though which knowledge about it must come; the knowledge itself is a fourth, and we must put as a fifth entity the actual object of knowledge which is the true reality. We have then, first, a name, second, a description, third, an image, and fourth, a knowledge of the object. (342b)

The dialectic thus begins with a term. In the case of *Republic*, it is justice. The first class here is the linguistic unit [justice]. The next class is to provide a description composed of nouns and verbs, which is where *Republic* immediately runs into trouble. In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato uses the more straightforward example of a circle (342c).<sup>17</sup> The third class is

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<sup>17</sup> Socrates/Plato is fond of using geometric examples as a model for trying to understand the more difficult forms.

an image. An image of a circle is clear enough, but justice is another matter. Because they are unable to satisfy the second class in *Republic*, Socrates tries moving onto the third class so they may come back to it, which is the purpose of the Kallipolis: to provide an image of the just state so that they may observe justice and come to define it. Whether or not the interlocutors or the reader come to know justice by the end of *Republic* is a matter of interpretation and debate.

The majority of the Platonic dialogues are unable to satisfy this second class. Eventually it becomes evident that an incontestable definition is impossible, and this is known as the *elenchus*, which is given particular prominence in the *Meno*. *Elenchus* in Ancient Greek can be translated as “shame,” “disgrace,” or “reproach.” The *elenchus* does not lead to better definitions; it leads to untraversable impasses. Dialogues end in *aporia*, which can mean puzzlement, or “being at a loss” – hence, the majority of Plato’s early dialogues are referred to as “*aporetic*.” However, while the *elenchus* may incur discouragement, it can also produce bewilderment and wonder. Wonder because the first step towards true knowledge is when one realizes the falsity of his/her opinions and is moved to consider something better (Dorter 11). This is significant because, as this thesis will show, the Forms are non-discursive, one cannot restrict oneself to a particular understanding of a certain concept. The dialectic, we argue, is about constantly introducing new ways to consider a concept, always improving upon one’s understanding.

The dialectic thus follows a sequence very much like the Cave and Line analogies. The philosophical dialectic breaks down language and leads the thinker up the Line until he can grasp the Form rationally. The individual begins with a name, which is only a representation of the Form, and then s/he progresses through the dialectic until s/he exits the Cave to come upon the Form as it is represented by the Sun. However, when one returns to the Cave it is impossible to describe the Form in words; the other prisoners think the speaker has gone mad. The prisoners must too be brought up from the Cave to “see” the Form.

The Divided Line, as Socrates explains in Book Six of *Republic*, represents the four modes of thinking. It is first partitioned into two segments; the upper representing the intelligent realm and the lower the sensible realm. Each partition is bisected again into perception of the image of an object and perception of the object itself. There is thus a fourfold classification: *eikasia*, which means picture-thinking, perceives the images of visible things; *pistis*, which means belief, perceives the sensible things themselves; *dianoia*, which means structured thought, perceives the images of intelligible things discursively; and, finally, *noesis*, which means intelligence, perceives intelligible things themselves beyond discursive reason. The images represented by the first and third levels are, in part, images in words (Dorter 45).

To further explain his epistemological point, Socrates uses the Cave analogy. Socrates explains, “And if you assume that the ascent and the contemplation of the things

above is the soul's ascension to the intelligible region, you will not miss my surmise, since that is what you desire to hear" (517b).<sup>18</sup> It is then clear that Socrates wishes the Cave and Line analogies to be used in conjunction. This proves problematic as Socrates has recourse only to images in order to explain concepts such as *dianoia* and *noesis*, which are intelligible and non-physical. Nonetheless, a comparison yields interpretative opportunities. "Picture," Socrates asks, "men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width" (514a). In the cave are prisoners who have been chained to the ground with their faces locked, staring at a wall. They have been there all their lives and know nothing else besides the cave. Behind them there is a fire and between them and the fire is a screen. Men walk behind the screen carrying various real world objects. These objects are then projected onto the wall in front of the prisoners as shadows. The prisoners come to believe these shadows to be truth (515c). Returning to the Line, the point of view of the prisoners can be understood as the first step of the line analogy, *eikasia*, as we are dealing with images of objects, which are twice removed from the Forms. Suddenly, one of the prisoners escapes and is able to see that the shadows they have taken to be truth are actually imitations of extended objects (515c-d). The prisoner has now moved onto the next step, *pistis*, as he is dealing with extended objects, but still not the Forms. The extended objects are "more real" than the shadows because the objects are imitations of the Forms, which are true reality; whereas the shadows are imitations of imitations. The prisoner now begins to wander out of the

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<sup>18</sup> Socrates then follows this up with, "But God knows whether it is true," thus introducing skepticism into all that has been previously said.

cave and into the outside world. However, the sun hurts his eyes and he is not yet able to appreciate the light it provides (516a). Now the prisoner has entered the intelligible section of understanding with the third step in the Line known as thought. Eventually, the prisoner adjusts his eyes and understands that the sun “provides the seasons and the courses of the year and presides over all things in the visible region, and is in some sort the cause of all these things that they had seen” (516e). The prisoner has thus completed the Line of cognitive process and reached the final step of understanding, *noesis*. “Then, if this is true,” Socrates argues, “our view of these matters must be this, that education is not in reality what some people proclaim it to be in their profession. What they aver is that they can put true knowledge into a soul that does not possess it, as if they were inserting vision into blind eyes” (518c). What Socrates hopes to convey is the process by which the dialectical method elevates the mind into the purely rational strata where virtues such as justice can be understood.

The Good can be understood by the analogy of the sun, which is presented as the son of the Good. In the intelligible realm, the Good plays the same role in relation to the intellect as the sun does in relation to sight in the sensible realm. Without light, the eye can see nothing; but with the sun, everything is illuminated. Likewise, without the sun, plants cannot exist, and thus without it the whole ecosystem would be ruined. Accordingly, the Good allows things to be known and provides the capacity of knowing. Moreover, like the sun, the Good is also knowable (Reale 200).

The Cave analogy is an allegory not only of the progression through the line, but of the life of the philosopher as well. One of the most striking details of the Cave analogy is that once the prisoner has been freed from the Cave, s/he must return once again down into the cave. This is for two reasons. Firstly, ontologically speaking, the philosopher remains in the sensible realm until death so s/he cannot exist only in the intelligible realm. Secondly, the philosopher returns into the cave so s/he can assist the other prisoners to escape.

We can thus conclude that there is a continuum between *eikasia* to *noesis* and back to *eikasia*. This continuum is represented by the cyclical structure of *Republic*. Book One opens with the famous words, “I went down yesterday to the Piraeus [...]” (327). This is noteworthy for several reasons. One, it is clearly invoking the image of descent. The Piraeus was also a port town and thus represents a place of transit. It also juxtaposes Book Ten, whereby Socrates recounts the Myth of Er, where the souls of the dead disembark and embark from one life to the next. At the beginning, Socrates has gone down to the Piraeus to witness the celebration for the goddess Bendis, who was worshipped with orgiastic rites similar to those of Dionysus (Dorter 23–4). The celebration entails a horseback race with the riders carrying torches (328a). Conversely, the goddesses at the end of the dialogue are the Sirens and the Fates, who sing the harmony of the spheres, all of whom are in the midst of a brilliant light that stretches through heaven and earth (616b–617d). The dialogue thus moves from a goddess associated with sensuality and is represented by artificial light to goddesses associated

with the harmony of rational necessity and are represented with the natural light of the heavens (Dorter 24).

Furthermore, the passage of the Myth of Er is precipitated by a lacklustre definition of justice. While Socrates argues the importance of establishing a rational definition of justice, they only ever arrive at images of an ideal state and person, and finally a myth. This makes sense given that the highest level of the intelligible is non-discursive, as explained by the Line and *Seventh Letter*. In *Republic* alone, Plato uses the Cave analogy, the Myth of Metals, and the Myth of Er, all of which are imagistic representations that are meant to explain rational concepts. They are improvements over the arguments from analogy as they are better received by Socrates' interlocutors than are the majority of his discursive points, especially his contentious retort against Thrasymachus. But Socrates is adamant that the philosopher cannot be satisfied with images. The philosophical justification for the conception of justice will have its basis in the universalizing quality of rationality, which is the basis of justice and which abstracts from all individual differences (Dorter 32). However, given the outcome of *Republic*, and other aporetic dialogues, we are forced to question whether this is possible at all.

Moreover, the interlocutors appear to be purposively positioned by Plato to express the reader's inevitable dissatisfaction (Dorter 17). There are numerous examples, not only in *Republic* but also throughout the entire Platonic corpus of characters repeatedly expressing doubts about the persuasiveness of Socrates - the supposed

“spokesperson” of Plato - and his arguments. On top of that, Socrates himself is constantly reiterating his own ignorance and dissatisfaction with the discussion’s outcome. This is hardly the sort of method an author should adopt if s/he wishes the reader to take his/her writing as established doctrine. Therefore, we must conclude that Plato’s dialogues cannot be regarded as orthodoxy. Nevertheless, the intensity and thoroughness with which the dialogues are presented indicate that they are meant to be taken seriously (Dorter 18). What this means is that what Plato wants to emphasize is not so much the conclusions, but the paths taken by the characters.

In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato asserts:

One statement at any rate I can make in regard to all who have written or who may write with a claim to knowledge of the subjects to which I devote myself [...] Such writers can in my opinion have no real acquaintance with the subject. I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once become self-sustaining. (341c-d)

Despite outlining the methodology which one must pass through in order to acquaint oneself with the Forms, Plato is adamant that it is nonetheless rife with inherent flaws,



namely language. "One might [...] speak forever about the inaccurate character of each of the four," Plato claims, "The important thing is that [...] there are two things, the essential reality and the particular quality, and when the mind is in quest of knowledge not of the particular but of the essential, each of the four confronts the mind with the unsought particular, whether in verbal or in bodily form" (343b-c). Each of the four (as outlined in 342b: a name, a description, an image, and a knowledge of the object) makes the form that is expressed in words or images liable to refutation by empirical evidence, meaning all inquirers are "prey to complete perplexity and uncertainty" (343c).

The issue Plato is stressing here is the problem of language. Because of the inadequacy of language, the first four classes do as much to illustrate the particular quality of any object as they do to illustrate its Form (343). Language can only refer to particular, discrete entities, not their respective universal Form because language itself is divided and particular. For example, language can speak of various triangles, but cannot represent the Form of triangle. Names, Plato maintains:

are in no case stable. Nothing prevents the things that are now called round from being called straight and the straight round, and those who have transposed the names and use them in the opposite way will find them no less stable than they are now. The same thing for that matter is true of a description, since it consists of nouns and of verbal expressions, so that in a description there is nowhere any sure ground that is sure

enough. (343b)

“Hence,” Plato concludes, “no intelligent man will ever be so bold as to put into language those things which his reason contemplated, especially not into a form that is unalterable – which must be the case with what is expressed in written symbols” (343). The conclusion we arrive at is that the Forms are non-discursive and cannot be captured or perfectly expressed discursively.

Recall that in *Republic*, Socrates stressed that they should not discuss the Good itself:

Nay, my beloved, let us dismiss for the time being the nature of the good in itself, for to attain to my present surmise of that seems a pitch above the impulse that wings my flight today. But of what seems to be the offspring of the good and most nearly made in its likeness I am willing to speak if you too wish it, and otherwise to let the matter drop.

Well, speak on, he said, for you will duly pay me the tale of the parent another time.

I could wish, I said, that I were able to make and you to receive the payment and not merely the interest. But at any rate receive this interest and the offspring of the good. Have a care, however, lest I deceive you unintentionally with a false reckoning of the interest. (506e-507)

If we carry this metaphor through, we can conclude that Socrates never manages to pay down the principle, only the interest. In order to resolve this debt, we must move beyond what is literally presented in the text (Reale 196).

Giovanni Reale argues that “Plato presents his masterpiece only as the interest on, or as the offspring of, something he has not trusted to writing, which therefore lies outside what he has written” (196). Reale asserts, “Plato’s written dialogues are not wholly self-sufficient but instead stand in need of their author, who offers the key which opens all doors [...] Therefore, in reading Plato, we have to employ two distinct traditions: the direct tradition of his writings, and the indirect tradition of the Unwritten Doctrines which have been handed down to us by his followers” (xiv-xv). Reale makes an important point when he observes that there are inconsistencies in the dialogues, but he takes a step too far suggesting there are “keys” that could decode the problematic dialogues for the reader. For one, the “Unwritten Doctrines” as recorded by various students and maintained by neo-Platonists show little conformity and splinter off into myriad possible interpretive paths.

Secondly, many scholars such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault have cast doubt on the argument that an author can stand over a text and dictate to readers a proper interpretation. In “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes writes, “a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writing [...] blend[s]

and clash[es]" (876). "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text," Barthes continues, "to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (877). For Barthes, "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (875). Accordingly, "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations to dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author" (877). Barthes' points can certainly be applied to Plato's dialogues. At no point in his corpus does Plato reveal himself as author; his voice is constantly deferred and mediated by not just Socrates, but by a multitude of voices. In *Phaedo*, Plato goes so far as to announce his absence (59b). Thus, Reale is rejecting the possibility that these caesuras are interpretive opportunities; that Plato is making a philosophical point here.

In *Phaedrus*, Socrates asserts that the philosopher does not put the "things of greatest value" on paper, but instead writes them directly onto the soul of the student capable of receiving them. Jill Gordon reasons that what turns a student towards the value of philosophy "includes necessarily the extralogical, and so is not easily named or understood by the analytic method" (4). If we are to take seriously Plato's point about the Line analogy,<sup>19</sup> we must conclude that the human condition is limited and cannot have

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<sup>19</sup> As well as his points about the soul in *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*, which will be discussed in chapters two and three.

direct, discursive access to transcendent Forms or ideas. Taking this into account, Plato cannot rely on rational means alone to achieve his philosophical ends. Accordingly, Plato routinely makes use of various literary techniques such as metaphor, simile, and irony (Gordon 2).

Gordon outlines five presumptions that underlie the traditional scholarship of the dialogues: 1) The dialogues are intended to convey Plato's thought, 2) Socrates speaks for Plato, 3) The arguments in the dialogues (usually Socrates') are the philosophical core of the dialogues and are the (only) appropriate objects of philosophical analysis,<sup>20</sup> 4) Logical virtues are philosophical virtues, and likewise, logical vices are philosophical vices, 5) Categorizing the dialogues into "early," "middle," and "late" periods in Plato's writing career is not only possible but beneficial to our analysis and improves our understanding of Plato's thought (6). These are a collection of various schools of thought that have imposed a certain reading upon the dialogues, yet there is nothing within the dialogues themselves to justify any of these claims. Most problematic of this list are arguably 1 and 2, because accordingly readers must try and reconcile the contradictions that Socrates makes in different dialogues.<sup>21</sup> The textual ambiguities and inconsistencies subvert the traditional reading of the dialogues as "Plato's thought"; for if Plato's intention was to present a compendium of his thoughts, he surely chose the most inefficient method.

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<sup>20</sup> Chapter two will deal with this with our analysis of *Symposium*.

<sup>21</sup> As we shall see in Chapter two, *Phaedrus* is a prime example of this problem.

I would agree with Reale that we have to move beyond what is literally written, but we do not necessarily need to move beyond the text, *per se*. As Jacques Derrida famously claims in *Of Grammatology*, “there is nothing outside the text”. “A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game,” writes Derrida. “A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. Its law and its rules are not, however, harboured in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked in the *present*, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception” (*Dissemination* 63). Like Plato’s point in the *Seventh Letter*, language – text especially, as we shall see in *Phaedrus* – cannot be pinned down. Derrida writes:

The system is not primarily that of what someone meant-to-say [un *vouloire-dire*]. Finely regulated communications are established, through the play of language, among diverse functions of the word, and, within it, among diverse strata or regions of culture. These communications or corridors of meaning can sometimes be declared or clarified by Plato when he plays upon them “voluntarily” [...] No absolute privilege allows us to master its textual system. This limitation can and should nevertheless be displaced to a certain extent. (95-6)

The text creates a network of signifiers for the reader to form various interpretive connections. Whatever connections Plato “voluntarily” or “intentionally” made should

not be given priority over other interpretations, a) because we do not have access to his private thoughts, and b) the problem of language and text. Accordingly, we cannot arrive at a definitive interpretation of the dialogues. Derrida writes, “There is always a surprise in store for [...] any criticism that might think it had mastered the game, surveyed all the threads at once, deluding itself, too, in wanting to look at the text without touching it, without laying a hand on the ‘object,’ without risking [...] the addition of some new thread” (63). The writer puts the text into play, and the reader is able to tease out various threads to form various interpretations. That is not to say we are claiming that meaning is impossible; rather we are resisting recourse to an unequivocal domination of one interpretation over others. As we shall see in chapters two and three, this is also what the dialectic seeks to do.

## 1.6 Summary

Socrates’ attack on poetry stems from his conviction that it lacks *techné* and is unable to convey any form of knowledge as it is twice removed from the Forms. Philosophy is superior because it has a *techné* called dialectic and is thus able to convey knowledge because with dialectic one can discuss the Forms. However, this is not necessarily the case as the Forms cannot in fact be expressed discursively. We can thus conclude that Socrates’ claim of knowledge requiring a *logos* is problematic; problematic because knowledge is made possible by the Forms and the Good, which are non-discursive. This of course throws the entire program of philosophy into *aporia*.

Consequently, Plato must find a way to do philosophy in light of the problem of non-discursiveness, which will be explored in the next chapter as we look at *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*.

While Socrates' faith in *logos* may be at odds with his metaphysics, his remarks about poetry still stand. In Chapter Three, we will return to Socrates' remarks about poetry, and explore a new way of critiquing poetry that moves beyond mimesis, thus answering Socrates' challenge at 607d: "And we would allow her advocates who are not poets but lovers of poetry to plead her cause in prose without meter, and show that she is not only delightful but beneficial to orderly government and all the life of man."



## Chapter Two

### 2.1 Introduction

After the points made in chapter one, we are currently left with the problem of non-discursiveness; the dialectic seems doomed to failure if the Forms, and therefore knowledge, are beyond language. Fortunately, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* illustrate the means by which we can think and speak about the Forms and the Good despite the fact they are transcend language. In these dialogues we find strong examples of Plato's *elenchus* and the challenge of definition with their treatment of the question of beauty. In the *Symposium* especially we see the hubris of the attempt to define as each interlocutor tries in vain to define beauty. The word hubristic is appropriate because a definition's *telos* is a bold claim: definition aims to exhaust comprehensively an idea without any remainders or exceptions.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, Socrates builds his retorts on these remainders.<sup>23</sup> The implicit claim of a definition is that an idea like beauty can be captured by *logos* that unites the universal name to the plurality of content, one as concise as to be called a definition. Accordingly, herein Plato's dialogues struggle, and *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* are no exception. The point to be gleaned from these dialogues is that there is something about beauty that is inaccessible to *logos* (Hyland 25). This will lead us to Plato's ideas on divine madness, divine dispensation, recollection, and *eros*. And, for the

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<sup>22</sup> Appropriately, Agathon (175e) and Alcibiades (215b) both accuse Socrates of being hubristic.

<sup>23</sup> By "remainder" we mean particulars that remain unaccounted for by an attempted, universalizing definition.

purposes of this thesis, it will show us how Plato reconciles the discursive and non-discursive elements of dialectic. According to the dialectic, definition becomes a process of opening a sphere of discussion as opposed to a pinning down and dissecting; it is dynamic and in constant need of revision.

Moreover, *Phaedrus*' discussion of writing illuminates Plato's stylistic choice of the dialogue, as opposed to writing treatises. The *Second* and *Seventh Letters* also show that language cannot capture Plato's philosophy. The dialogues bypass this problem by taking into account the inadequacy of language. Plato does not use exposition; he uses a plethora of literary techniques, deferring his voice, and destabilizing the reader leaving the matter of thought. The dialogues introduce various philosophical problems, and open different avenues for the reader to continue on with the questioning, the dialectic.

Likewise, *Symposium* is an excellent example of how Plato puts this into practice. *Symposium* continues *Phaedrus*' discussion of *eros* and its relevance to dialectic. However, in order to analyse properly *Symposium*'s points about *eros* and dialectic, which is to say Diotima's speech, we must first take into consideration all that has come before it by observing how the various interlocutors' positions are presented, critiqued, and then finally sublimated in Diotima's speech. Accordingly, taking into consideration Plato's points on writing in *Phaedrus* and the *Second* and *Seventh Letters*, *Symposium*, on top of expanding the discussion of *eros*, also shows how a philosophical problem can be

introduced and discussed, and the way in which the dialectic reconciles the problem of discursiveness and non-discursiveness.

## 2.2 *Phaedrus*

We are faced with a problem after reading *Republic*: if the Good is so important for living an ethical life, and we are unable to define it or know it discursively, how can we possibly know it at all? According to Socrates, it is by virtue of recollection. In our past experience as disembodied souls, we experienced the Good. However, as embodied souls we cannot clearly envision the Good. Nonetheless, the Good has left a trace on us, which allows us to intuit it amidst our sensual experience. *Eros*, the feeling of desire for the Good that we experience when seeing a particular participating in its respective Form, is the non-discursive experience that begins the discursive process of recollection, which ultimately culminates in a non-discursive intuition.

*Phaedrus* challenges orthodox Platonism<sup>24</sup> because it seemingly undermines Socrates' previous points about the value of rationality and the danger of irrationality.<sup>25</sup> Here, Socrates actually praises madness, particularly divine madness, thus directly contradicting his arguments in *Ion*. Socrates discusses the value of the inspiration from the Muses and goes so far as to claim that the most important intellectual breakthroughs have come by virtue of divine inspiration. Socrates actually privileges "the superiority of

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<sup>24</sup> By "orthodox Platonism" we are referring to the five assumptions of traditional scholarship as outlined by Gordon (6) on pages 43 and 44.

<sup>25</sup> This is perhaps why the *Phaedrus* "was obliged to wait almost twenty-five centuries before anyone gave up the idea that it was a badly composed dialogue" (Derrida 66)

heaven-sent madness over man-made sanity” (244d). Socrates is no stranger to this, as he is often instructed by his daemon to continue with a discourse, as is the case in the *Phaedrus*.<sup>26</sup> The Muses are thus associated with the divine and eternal, therefore representing knowledge for Socrates. The pursuit of the Muses and divine truth is what separates rhetoric from dialectic, bad writing from good, and belief/opinion from knowledge.

The dialogue begins with Phaedrus reading a text by Lysias discussing love. Socrates is critical of the piece on the grounds that it discredits the irrational quality of love. “False is the tale,” proclaims Socrates:

that when a lover is at hand favor ought rather to be accorded to one who does not love, on the ground that the former is mad, and the latter sound of mind. That would be right if it were an invariable truth that madness is an evil, but in reality, the greatest blessings come by way of madness, indeed of madness that is heaven-sent. (244a)

This is a sharp turn from Socrates’ point in *Ion* when he criticizes Ion, along with rhapsodes and poets in general, for being irrationally driven by the Gods, and possessing no real art or technique. Socrates now claims that “if any man come to the gates of poetry without the madness of the Muses, persuaded that skill alone will make him a good poet, then shall he and his works of sanity with him be brought to naught by the poetry of

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<sup>26</sup> This occurs also in *Apology* and *Crito*.

madness, and behold, their place is nowhere to be found” (245a). Nevertheless, Socrates is ambivalent towards the issue of madness and inspiration. He will try and draw a line between human madness, which is destructive, and divine madness, which is benevolent. More specifically, Socrates will show how *eros* is a form of divine madness, and essential for the pursuit of philosophy (Hyland 71). Plato is attempting to emphasize how philosophy cannot be reduced to a purely logical activity; it is, like poetry, an activity that involves inspiration (72). This point is illustrated by the metaphorical and poetic quality of the Chariot Analogy – amongst the many others – and will be sustained by Socrates’ point about writing towards the end of *Phaedrus* and Plato’s *Second* and *Seventh Letters*.

In order to prove the value of divine madness, Socrates begins a lengthy exposition of the nature of the soul. He prefaces his exposition by saying that it will be persuasive to the wise, but not to the clever (245c). What are we to make of this distinction between the wise and the clever? Socrates is implying that his account of the soul will not be logically vigorous, and the clever will be focused on this, but the wise will look more deeply (Hyland 73). Moreover, Socrates admits that this is only what the soul seems to be (246a). Like Diotima’s speech in *Symposium* and Socrates’ Myth of Er in the *Republic*, Socrates’ account of the soul in *Phaedrus* is heavily mythologized and fictional. That is to say, it is metaphorical/dramatic, and meaning will thus be achieved non-discursively. Plato is thus connecting wisdom with the ability to interpret non-discursively. To that end, our analysis will be preoccupied more so with the manner in which Socrates presents the argument, rather than their validity.

Socrates claims that the soul is immortal and subject to reincarnation. To articulate his point, Socrates uses his famous Chariot Allegory. Socrates describes the soul as a Charioteer trying to reign in two conflicting horses, one representing rationality and the other representing sensuality. The Charioteers follow the Gods in a procession around the heavens, but occasionally the unruly, sensual horse will buck, preventing the Charioteer from seeing the different forms of truth. Eventually the unruly horse drags the Charioteer down to earth and the soul is thus embodied. This passage is instructive for several reasons. Firstly, Socrates is portraying the gods as purely contemplative, which is a drastic turn from the more Homeric depiction of the gods as having various human flaws. Moreover, the gods do not speak. They simply repeat the procession over and over without discussing it. They have no need for dialectic in order to appreciate knowledge; they simply know it unmediated. Therefore, since the gods' experience of knowledge is unmediated, they have no need for language, for *logos*. *Logos* is thus a human phenomenon; it is an attempt to compensate for our incomplete insight into knowledge (Hyland 76). Our incompleteness, which is also elucidated in the *Symposium*, is evidenced in the *Phaedrus* by the poverty of our knowledge due to our inferior chariots.

However, the experience of the heavens has left a trace on the soul, and this allows the soul to experience the Forms represented by matter insofar as sensible particulars participate in them. Our intellectual experience, unlike the unmediated experience of the gods, is two non-discursive moments conjoined by *logos*. We first have the non-discursive experience that begins the desire for knowledge. That is to say,

something happens that makes us want to pursue the discursive struggle towards knowledge. Secondly, if we are fortunate enough, through dialectic, we may attain a non-discursive experience, or intuition, of knowledge. This intuition is occasional and brief. It is incomplete. Logos, and dialectic, are thus in the middle between our initiating and culminating non-discursive intuitions (Hyland 77). It is what allows us to move from that initial fleeting experience towards drawing some kind of conclusion, as will be seen in the *Symposium*.

The soul is reincarnated in a state befitting the level of truth it managed to experience while in the heavens:

For only the soul that has beheld truth may enter into this our human for – seeing that man must needs understand the language of forms, passing from a plurality of perceptions to a unity gathered together by reasoning – and such understanding is a recollection of those things which our souls beheld aforetime as they journeyed with their god, looking down upon the things which now we suppose to be, and gazing up to that which truly is.  
(449c)

We gather many perceptions into one using logos and recollection. We recollect the Forms from our previous disembodied state, and use these universal ideas to bind various particular instantiations using logos. It is important to note here the positive role of recollection and reminders (Hyland 79). Socrates gives particular focus to the idea of

beauty (250d). Here, Socrates is saying that when we experience beauty in a particular, physical object, we are reminded of the idea of beauty. Drew Hyland observes:

In this account [...] there are two non-discursive experiences in play – one that originates and one that culminates our (always finite) understanding of beauty. First is the non-discursive but extraordinary power *experience* of beauty “here” which, in turn, will “remind” us of our *previous* non-discursive experience of beauty itself when we were with our god. One crucial consequence of this situation needs to be reiterated [...] what beauty is cannot be reduced to any sort of “definition,” even an elaborate one. Indeed, it cannot even be reduced to a logos. It is inseparable from non-discursive insight. (82)

Accordingly, the dialectic that occurs along with our non-discursive experiences will never replace those experiences; it happens in light of them. That is to say, our ability to discuss ideas such as beauty is enabled by our non-discursive intuitions. Dialectic is therefore the attempted joining of our non-discursive insights (Hyland 88). We are now seeing the way in which Plato is able to reconcile the discursive and non-discursive elements of dialectic. This will be further developed in *Symposium*. However, before we can continue this train of thought, we must now briefly turn our attention to the question of writing.



### 2.3 On Writing

*Phaedrus* then shifts from an investigation into the soul to a discussion of rhetoric and writing. The shift is rather abrupt and curious, which leaves us with a number of interpretive possibilities. One possibility that is relevant to this thesis is to read Socrates' critique of writing in light of what was previously discussed in regards to epistemology, recollection, and the soul. On the surface, Socrates is criticizing writing for being simply a reminder, and not an object of knowledge. However, if we push our analysis beyond the literal level, we see how writing can supplement and aid the process of recollection. Moreover, we begin to see how Plato takes Socrates' points into consideration by writing the dialogues. Taken as a whole, *Phaedrus* provides insight into the style and form of the dialogues, and how Plato is able to take the risk of writing.

Socrates claims, "there is nothing shameful in the mere writing of speeches" (258d). However, he draws a clear distinction between good and bad writing. Socrates asks Phaedrus, "does not a good and successful discourse presuppose a knowledge in the mind of the speaker of the truth about his subject?" (260e). To which Phaedrus replies:

what I have heard is that the intending orator is under no necessity of understanding what is truly just, but only what is likely to be thought just by the body of men who are to give judgment; nor need he know what is truly good or noble, but what will be thought so, since it is on the latter, not the former, that persuasion depends. (260)

Socrates is thus speaking about dialectic whereas Phaedrus is referring to sophistry. What is at stake here is the pursuit of truth, and Socrates is trying to draw a very fine line between rhetoric, which is benign in and of itself, and sophistry. Socrates defines "the art of rhetoric" as "a kind of influencing of the mind by means of words" (261b). However, Socrates is careful to differentiate influence from persuasion. Accordingly, he explains, "It would seem to follow [...] that the art of speech displayed by one who has gone chasing after beliefs, instead of knowing the truth, will be a comical sort of art, in fact no art at all" (262c). Rhetoric is thus an art when it is being used in pursuit of truth, i.e. dialectic; whereas sophistry disavows truth and makes man the measure. Moreover, Socrates explains that there are two procedures to the dialectic: one "in which we bring a dispersed plurality under a single form," (265d) and secondly, "The reverse of the other, whereby we are enabled to divide into forms, following the objective articulation" (265e). Dialectic thus moves in one of two directions: from multiplicity to unity, or from unity to multiplicity or division. However, as the dialogues show, Socrates is only successful in the latter, not the former.

Dialectic is thus much more than the arrangement of language; it is a movement towards truth. Socrates compares rhetoric to medicine and concludes, "In both cases there is a nature that we have to determine, in the nature of body in the one, and of soul in the other" (270b). Likewise, "Since the function of oratory is in fact to influence men's souls, the intending orator must know what types of soul there are [...] To the types of soul thus discriminated there corresponds a determinate number of types of discourse" (271d). It is

therefore the duty of the orator to “on the one hand list the various natures among his prospective audiences and on the other divide things into their kinds and embrace each individual thing under a single form” (273e). Socrates says as much of poetry. He and Phaedrus agree it would be ridiculous if “someone went up to Sophocles or Euripides and said he knew how to compose lengthy dramatic speeches about a trifling matter, and quite short ones about a matter of moment [...] and so forth, and that he considered that by teaching these accomplishments he could turn a pupil into a tragic poet” (268d). The dialectician accordingly, “must know the truth about the subject that you speak or write about [...] secondly [...] must have a corresponding discernment of the nature of the soul, discover the type of speech appropriate to each nature, and order and arrange your discourse accordingly” (277c).<sup>27</sup> Here Socrates is again reaching out beyond *logos*. He acknowledges that one must take the interlocutor (or reader) into consideration when discussing ideas or Forms.<sup>28</sup> The *techne* of dialectic cannot be reduced to any set of predicates because there must always be an attempt to modify according the infinitely variable spectra of potential interlocutors in that they each bring their own unique mix of intelligence, experience, expertise, and prejudices. We see this especially played out in *Symposium*.

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<sup>27</sup> This can be coupled with Socrates’ discussion of his dialectical method as midwifery in the *Theaetetus*.

<sup>28</sup> Herein, Plato is anticipating some later theories of reader response.

Socrates now moves onto his famous “Myth of Theuth” and the problem of writing. Theuth approaches King Thamus, having invented writing, proclaiming it to be a means for improving memories. To which Thamus replies:

And so it is that you, by reason of your tender regard for the writing that is your offspring, have declared the very opposite of its true effect. If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance, for by telling them of many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men filled, not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows. (275)

Socrates thus problematizes the notion of writing as a great innovation in history. Writing is a tool for reminding, but one must be careful that it does not come to substitute for his/her memory. Furthermore, writing is eternally silent: “if you ask [it] anything about what [it] say[s], from a desire to be instructed, [it] go[es] on telling you just the same

thing forever” (275e). Further still, texts can be misinterpreted and appropriated for agendas that are contrary to its previous intention or point.<sup>29</sup>

However, it is difficult to take Socrates at face value here because his points are subverted by statements he made previously about reminding and recollection during his palinode:

For only the soul that has beheld truth may enter into this our human form – seeing that man must needs understand the language of forms, passing from a plurality of perceptions to a unity gathered together by reasoning – and such understanding is a recollection of those things which our souls beheld aforetime as they journeyed with their god, looking down upon the things which now we suppose to be, and gazing up to that which truly is [...] Wherefore if a man makes right use of such means of remembrance and ever approaches to the full vision of the perfect mysteries, he and he alone becomes truly perfect. (249c)

Note the play on “recollection” (*anamnesis*) and “remembrance” (*hypomnesis*).<sup>30</sup> Here, Socrates is suggesting that reminders are necessary for recollection; we recollect the Forms and the Good because we are reminded of them by physical objects. Furthermore, Socrates reasons that the dialectician “will sow his seed in literary gardens [...] collecting

<sup>29</sup> An example that comes immediately to mind is the way the Nazis appropriated Nietzsche’s texts to legitimize their racist agenda, likening the Aryan race to the *Uebermensch*.

<sup>30</sup> Translations vary, but the difference between *anamnesis* v.s. *hypomnesis* is how we can understand Socrates’ differentiation between recollection and reminder.

a store of refreshment [...] for his own memory" (276d). Here Socrates is not only softening his criticism of writing, but is suggesting it as a tool for philosophers.

Who are we to trust? Thamus or Socrates? What is even more complicating is that Socrates is quoting Thamus to make his own point! This destabilizing conundrum provokes the reader into taking some kind of interpretive stance that is not clearly – or at least not literally – resolved by the text itself (Hyland 120). What we eventually see is how Plato illustrates the problem of writing and how one can work through it.

At 276a, Socrates makes an interesting distinction between something that is written in a text vs. that which is written on the soul:

Socrates: But tell me, is there another sort of discourse, that is brother to the written speech, but of unquestioned legitimacy? Can we see how it originates, and how much better and more effective it is than the other?

Phaedrus: What sort of discourse have you now in mind, and what is its origin?

Socrates: The sort that goes together with knowledge, and is written in the soul of the learner, that can defend itself, and knows to whom it should speak and to whom it should say nothing.

Phaedrus: You mean no dead discourse, but the living speech, the original of which the written discourse may fairly be called a kind of image.

In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato refers to the gestation period of philosophical ideas. One must dwell with an idea before s/he can be said to know or understand it (341c-d). In order for something to be written on the soul, or said to be properly recollected, it requires time and effort, whereas reading a text or manuscript is a “quick fix.” This is reminiscent of Socrates’ bullying of Ion. Ion can memorize lengthy speeches – especially those of Homer – but he has nothing to contribute in a cerebral discussion of Homer or any of the things about which Homer writes. Plato is afraid that someone will simply read about an idea, remember the passage, and erroneously believe that s/he understands it.<sup>31</sup> Rather, one must go through the lengthy process of recollection, of learning. This is what we understand by the contrast between recollection and reminding. Recollection is the process itself whereas a reminder is a gesture towards what has been, or needs to be, recollected.

Worse still, Plato fears how easily a text can be misunderstood. In the *Second Letter*, he writes:

It is a very great safeguard to learn by heart instead of writing. It is impossible for what is written not to be disclosed. That is the reason why I have never written anything about these things, and why there is not and will not be any written work of Plato’s own. What are now called his are

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<sup>31</sup> “I took a speed-reading course and read *War and Peace* in twenty minutes. It involves Russia.” -Woody Allen

the work of a Socrates embellished and modernized. Farewell and believe.

Read this letter now at once many times and burn it. (314c)

It is tempting to assert that this statement plays into Reale's point that there are ancillary works that can fill in the gaps that Plato left in the dialogues. However, it would be more appropriate to assert that Plato's point is that writing in general cannot encapsulate his philosophical notions (Hyland 94). However, given our previous points, we can take this a step further and assert that language cannot encapsulate philosophical notions. The problem is that a word cannot directly transmit meaning. There is never a fixed relationship between signifier and signified, so there is always a potential for something to be lost in translation.<sup>32</sup>

Nonetheless, it would be egregious to suggest that Plato is anti-writing; he wrote the dialogues after all. As always, one must be careful when interpreting Plato's supposed dismissal of writing. Clearly, if we are to take Socrates' word at face value then a philosopher should avoid writing and stick to speech, which is what Socrates did. Yet, Plato is obviously contradicting his master. What are we to make of this? Note Socrates' equivocation of writing and reminding: Socrates is suggesting that writing is not a form of knowledge; rather it is a reminder of knowledge (Hyland 121). Recall Socrates' discussion of recollection and the soul: whenever we see a particular that participates in

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<sup>32</sup> In *Dissemination*, Derrida explains how poets are aware of this problem of language and achieve meaning obliquely by virtue of poetic language. Plato achieves much the same by writing in the form of the dialogue.



the idea of beauty, we are reminded by the true form that we experience as disembodied souls. Clearly, Plato does not have a problem with reminders and recollection as a means towards knowledge. Accordingly, earlier in the dialogue, Phaedrus and Socrates are discussing Lysias' exposition on love. Phaedrus tries to recall it from memory but is unable. Socrates learns that Phaedrus actually has the text with him, and insists that he read from it. Socrates' preference of the text to Phaedrus' memory seemingly contradicts his later critique.<sup>33</sup> Plato is problematizing the idea of writing in order to get the reader thinking about the value of written texts (Hyland 122). But to accept simply the inadequacy of language and to give up on the pursuit of knowledge and recollection is the way of the Sophists. To this end, Plato wrote the dialogues taking into account the inadequacy of language (Hyland 110). The dialogues are an attempt, as Hyland states, "to limn the possibility of philosophy, to limn it through mimetic portrayal, to limn and invite the possibility of that life of dwelling-with and its culminating experiences" (Hyland 108).

The dialogues are not to be taken as expositions of Plato's philosophy; they are to be taken for their matter of thought. It is likely that Plato took seriously Socrates' point about writing. To that end, Plato did not write treatises; he wrote dialogues. Consequently, Plato discovered a style of writing that allowed him to take the risk of writing (Hyland 129). The dialogues affirm a particular form of writing in the light of

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<sup>33</sup> Aristotle will later critique the notion of memory, and suggest that a strong memory is actually a liability for a philosopher, as it is better to have to reconsider an idea rather than just recalling verbatim.

philosophy (Hyland 130). That is to say, the dialogues, with their myriad perspectives, *aporias*, contradictions, deconstructions, and usages of elenchus, represent a form of writing that embodies Socrates' metaphysical convictions as seen in *Republic*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus*. That knowledge of the Forms is non-discursive, but we must nonetheless find a way to think about them.<sup>34</sup> Plato achieves this because not only do the dialogues present the matter or subject of thought (the Forms, *eros*, etc.) but they also begin the questioning process, sometimes by Socrates' own *elenchus*, other times by the doubts expressed by the various interlocutors. The dialogues are not answering questions, they begin the questioning. They provide the materials for a reader to pursue the questions of philosophy. Nor do the dialogues didactically tell the reader what to think; they are simply inviting the reader to think (Hyland 131). Hence, Plato took himself out of the dialogues, leaving only the matter of thought (Hyland 128). Plato is not saying, "This is what you should think." He is saying, "Here are some things to think about, and here are some different ways of thinking about them." The dialogue form therefore reconciles the disparity between discursiveness and non-discursiveness.

## 2.4 *Symposium*

*Symposium* continues the discussion of *eros* and beauty started in *Phaedrus*. *Eros*, Plato argues, is a manifestation of our longing for the good and the beautiful, and is what fuels the dialectic. As Plato will explain in *Symposium*, *eros* is triadic. Firstly, it

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<sup>34</sup> Or, to think the unthinkable, as Deleuze would say.

represents our state of incompleteness. Secondly, it is the recognition of our incompleteness. And thirdly, it is our desire to sublimate and overcome our incompleteness (Hyland 39). Plato's point is that as physical, embodied entities we are lacking. Accordingly, *eros* desires what it lacks, and what we lack is the Good – as was seen in the Line Analogy from *Republic* - therefore we desire it. Moreover, what we desire is beautiful. That is not to say beauty = the good, but Plato is definitely drawing a strong connection. Thinking about the beautiful seems to lead us to think about the good. Beauty is thus a shining forth of the good (49). Moreover, beauty is the bridge between the two manifestations of *eros*. It is a physical and psychic phenomena; Plato speaks of beautiful bodies and souls (42). Furthermore, *eros* operates in a sequential manner. We are first struck with the pangs of *eros* when we recognize beauty in a physical object, and from there we are eventually led towards the good. In terms of the dialectic, we recognize beauty in the physique of others, then in their spirit and finally, through the process of friendship and discourse we formulate a proposition that actuates the good to the best of our ability. However, the sequential methodology of *eros* is crucial. Unless we begin with at the physical and work our way up, we are in danger of getting the process wrong and thus losing any potential knowledge provided by the Good. This failure can be seen in the historic fall from grace of Alcibiades, as alluded to at the end of *Symposium*. Plato is therefore pushing not only a philosophical point, but a political one as well. That is to say, unless human project can grasp these concepts of *eros* we are in great danger. What

we glean is that in order to perform the dialectic properly, the initiating and culminating non-discursive experiences must be given their due.

Moreover, we wish to draw particular attention to the form of the dialogue and how Plato conveys all these ideas. It is tempting to dismiss everything in the dialogue and focus only on Diotima's speech believing this to be the "point" of the dialogue, but this ignores all the attention to detail that Plato has given. *Symposium* is staged in a very theatrical way, with directions, scene-setting, conflict, etc. Furthermore, the argument develops out of all the points made by the interlocutors, until Plato sublimates what is needed by each into Diotima's speech. Plato has put the reader into the dialectic; we see how a philosophical argument develops through the various false starts and dead-ends of the different interlocutors. *Symposium* can then be taken as a sort of case-study for observing how Plato writes in light of the problem of writing that was explored in the *Phaedrus*. We are interested in both the philosophical points that Socrates makes using Diotima's speech and the way he gets there.<sup>35</sup> The means are just as important as the ends. As such, we will briefly analyze each participant's contribution to the discussion, focusing on how it fits within the whole. Finally, we arrive at Diotima's speech, which illustrates how all the threads of a discussion can be woven together into a rich, nuanced philosophical argument. More specifically, we see that philosophy does not happen in a vacuum; it is occasioned – occasioned not only by discussions and interlocutors, but also

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<sup>35</sup> This is similar to Marshall McLuhan's famous aphorism, "The medium is the message."

by private, non-discursive moments of inspiration. Taken together, *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* demonstrate how philosophy is more than practicing *logos*.

To start the dialogue, Socrates is invited to a party where each guest must give a praise of *eros*, which eventually turns into an attempt to define it. Agathon asserts they “shall take up this question of wisdom [...] and let Bacchus judge between us” (175e). Therein, Phaedrus presents a utilitarian position; Pausanias a sophistic; Eryximachus a scientific; Aristophanes a religious; Agathon a poetic; and Socrates, by way of Diotima, a philosophic (Hyland 139). The positions of Agathon and Socrates in the speeches indicate that the primary disputants in the contest are poetry and philosophy; and the beautiful Alcibiades, when he later enters the party drunk, is the personification of Dionysus (29). Interestingly, Alcibiades first crowns Agathon, but then declares Socrates the winner, referencing once again the “ancient quarrel.”

Phaedrus starts the contest claiming:

Thus we find that the antiquity of Love is universally admitted and in very truth he is the ancient source of all our highest good. For I, at any rate, could hardly name a greater blessing to the man that is to be than a generous lover, or, to the lover, than the beloved youth. For neither family, nor privilege, nor wealth, nor anything but Love can light that beacon which a man must steer by when he sets out to live the better life. (178c)

Phaedrus is making a utilitarian claim because he is focused on the gifts that *eros* brings to the lover and the beloved. Phaedrus references Alcestis, Orpheus, and Achilles. In the first two cases, Phaedrus explains how the beloved benefits from the lovers' respective sacrifices (179b-e). According to Phaedrus it is best to be a beloved because s/he stands to gain from all the sacrifices the lover is willing to make. However it is Achilles whom Phaedrus champions as the greatest lover for his self-sacrifice for Patroclus (179e-180c). Achilles, according to Phaedrus, was Patroclus' beloved, but is nevertheless willing to go to Troy and sacrifice himself in order to stand by his lover. Phaedrus explains:

I make a point of this because, while in any case the gods display special admiration for the valor that springs from Love, they are even more amazed, delighted, and beneficent when the beloved shows such devotion to his lover, than when the lover does the same for his beloved. For the lover, by virtue of Love's inspiration, is always nearer than his beloved to the gods. And this, I say, is why they paid more honor to Achilles than Alcestis, and sent him to the Islands of the Blessed. (180b)

Phaedrus is arguing that Achilles has no real incentive to sacrifice himself, as he is not the one that is inspired by *eros* and therefore does not desire Patroclus the way Patroclus desires him; nonetheless, he does so anyway, which is why the gods are so impressed. We can surmise that in all cases it is best to be a beloved because the beloved stands to gain most out of the relationship. By placing all the benefits of *eros* on the side of the

beloved, Phaedrus is effectively disassociating from *eros*, as the beloved does not experience desire (Hyland 31).

Pausanias is next, and he argues one cannot simply praise a single *eros*, because there are more than one: *kalos* and *aischros* (beautiful or shameful). Pausanias is a sophist and a relativist (181a). However, what is the criterion by which we judge beautiful from base? Herein, Pausanias fails. He first tries to establish the distinction based on homosexual versus heterosexual *eros*; homosexuality is beautiful, whereas heterosexuality is base (181b-e). However, this is problematic given his relativism. He then tries to base the distinction on the success of the lover. Any behaviour on behalf of the lover, no matter how shameful or base, can be beautiful so long as it seduces the beloved (181a). Plato will build on Pausanias' point that *eros* is neither inherently beautiful nor shameful, but he will try to establish some kind of criterion for beauty.

Aristophanes is scheduled to speak next, but is overcome with a case of the hiccups. Eryximachus, a physician, offers Aristophanes treatment and gives his own oration while Aristophanes rests. While Phaedrus and Pausanias understood *eros* primarily as personal, Eryximachus radically expands *eros* to the entire physical cosmos. However, Eryximachus will be unable to sustain his argument because he cannot resist making claims that extend beyond the physical (Hyland 34-5). Accordingly, as a man of science, Eryximachus uses medicine to draw a distinction between beautiful and base *eros*:

I propose, in deference to my own profession, to begin with the medical aspect. I would have you know that the body comprehends in its very nature the dichotomy of Love, for, as we all agree, bodily health and sickness are both distinct and dissimilar, and unlike clings to unlike. And so the desires of health are one thing, while the desires of sickness are quite another. (186b)

Eryximachus has thus shifted the dialogue away from the psychic dimension of *eros* to the physical (Hyland 35). Furthermore, Eryximachus is pushing his own *technē* (186b-e). His point is that *technē* can control the healthy/beautiful and diseased/ugly *eroseis* of the body. Eryximachus' goal is thus not only to extend *eros* throughout the cosmos, but also to control the cosmos using human *technē* (Hyland 35). To this end, Eryximachus maintains the distinction Pausanias made between beautiful and base *eros* (186b-c). However, now, thanks to *technē* we can control *eros* (187d-e).

Eryximachus then begins expanding *eros* to realms beyond human control (188). Moreover, as Eryximachus concludes his speech, he returns to Pausanias' psychic language of beauty, piety, *sophrosyne*, and justice (188e-d). However, given his scientific reductionism, he seems to be stepping outside his jurisdiction. What Plato achieves with Eryximachus' speech and its failure is a critique of *technē*, and its claim to be able to account for the entirety of the cosmos, human experience, and certainly the realm of beauty. As we shall see, Plato maintains the expansion of *eros* on behalf of Eryximachus,



but he is not as reductive as Eryximachus; *eros* and beauty will be psychic as well as physical (Hyland 37).

Aristophanes has now recovered from his hiccups and is ready to participate. Like Eryximachus, he will continue the discussion of *eros* in the vein of a metaphysical phenomenon, in the sense that it is not something we feel; rather it is a condition of our human existence. Aristophanes tells a humorous tale of ancient people, who were once joined together like Siamese twins, but were then split apart by the gods who feared their power. As a result, we are searching in vain to rediscover our lost unity (*Symposium* 189-91). Although Aristophanes frames this as a religious account of beauty and *eros*, we can see by his narrative that *eros* is hardly a god at all. It is our human condition after we have been rendered incomplete from our prior unity.<sup>36</sup> While Plato will draw on this idea, he will be more optimistic about our condition. Aristophanes is indeed decidedly pessimistic about our condition in that he believes that we as incomplete beings have desires that we cannot understand or reconcile. We literally cannot know ourselves, which is in stark contrast to Socrates' mantra of "know thyself." Aristophanes believes that since we ourselves cannot understand our desires, we need religious symbols and metaphors to try and make sense of it all.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the most glaring quality of Aristophanes' speech is that it does not once reference beauty or any of its derivatives; he has the *eros*, but not the beauty. Ironically then Aristophanes is only half right. Agathon

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<sup>36</sup> This equivocation of *eros* and human nature, and our present incompleteness after a prior unity corresponds to the "chariot analogy" in the *Phaedrus* (Hyland 140).

<sup>37</sup> A position that is strikingly similar to Freud's ideas of displacement and dream logic.

will compensate for this omission with his speech, and Plato will sublimate both positions, along with the previous points, in Socrates' account of Diotima's speech (Hyland 41).

If Aristophanes got *eros* right but beauty wrong, then Agathon gets beauty right but *eros* wrong. Agathon firmly establishes the connection between beauty and *eros*. He says *eros* is beautiful and loves the beautiful. Although Plato will supplant Agathon's assertion that *eros* is beautiful, we shall see that *eros* cannot adequately be understood without invoking its kinship of beauty (Hyland 42). Agathon then creates a link between *eros* and creativity (196d-e). The larger claim here is that creativity is the criterion of wisdom – more specifically, poetic creativity. The decisive issue of the dialogue now is whether creativity or understand, poetry or philosophy, is the highest human possibility (Hyland 42-3). That Alcibiades crowns Socrates as the winner suggests Plato is claiming philosophy as superior to poetry, understanding greater than creativity, but that is to put it too starkly. It would be more appropriate to point out the connection Plato is drawing between these two positions rather than an opposition.

When it is Socrates' turn, he disparages everything that has been said thus far but will gladly tell everyone the "truth" if they wish to hear it (199b). This is hardly the case as Socrates actually sublimates all the points and positions hitherto (Hyland 43). His first point is to assert the metaphysical principle that "everything longs for what it lacks, and that nothing longs for what it doesn't lack" (200b). Furthermore, "desiring to secure

something to oneself forever may be described as loving something which not yet to hand [...] and whoever feels a want is wanting something which is not yet to hand, and the object of his love [...] is [...] whatever he is lacking in" (200e). Hence, "Love is always the love of something, and [...] that something is what he lacks" (200e). Socrates is clearly sublimating Aristophanes' points about *eros* and the desire for what we lack. Furthermore, in regards to Agathon, because *eros* desires what it lacks, and since it desires the beautiful, we cannot say *eros* is beautiful (201b).<sup>38</sup> Agathon's formulation of *eros* was problematic because it failed to recognize Aristophanes' insight regarding its incompleteness; for Agathon, *eros* is total fullness (Hyland 45). In fact, *eros* is neither beautiful nor is it bad and ugly; "the fact is that he's between the two" (202b). Plato has thus sublimated Pausanias' point that *eros* is not inherently beautiful or ugly (Hyland 46). Unlike Pausanias, however, Diotima will establish some sort of criterion by which we can judge the beautiful and the ugly.

*Eros*, Diotima explains, was born from the copulation of Poros (Resource, or Plenty) and Penia (Poverty, Lack) and operates like the spirits who exist as intermediaries between Gods and men (202e). It "includes every kind of longing for happiness and for the good" (205d). Moreover, "To love is to bring forth upon the beautiful, both in body and in soul" (206b). *Eros* is not, as Agathon claims, "the author of those very virtues all around him" (197c), but rather that which draws us towards said "author". Therefore, it is

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<sup>38</sup> While Agathon does not interject, there is a counter-argument to Socrates' point. Socrates says one can be strong, fast, or healthy, and still desire it in the sense of wanting to possess more in the future. Therefore, it can be argued that *eros* is beautiful now and desires to be so in the future; hence *eros* is beautiful and loves the beautiful (Hyland 44).

important not to confuse *eros* with the beautiful. Rather, *eros* is the manifestation of our desire for the beautiful. Diotima thus establishes *eros* as the core of philosophy (203a). Philosophers are in between wisdom and ignorance, which explains Socrates' constant state of *aporia* (Hyland 48). At this point, however, an ambiguity begins to present itself as to whether *eros* desires the beautiful or the Good.

At 206b, Socrates asks Diotima what the function of *eros* is. "Love," Diotima tells Socrates, "is a longing for immortality" (207a). Likewise, "there's a divinity in human propagation, an immortal something in the midst of man's mortality" (206c). Hence, we long for "propagation [...]" because this is the one deathless and eternal element in our mortality" (206c). Because "to love is to bring forth upon the beautiful, both in body and in soul" (206b), we are therefore compelled to actualize the beautiful in the form of procreation. In terms of the "body," all life forms wish to produce offspring (207a-b). Conversely, in terms of the "soul," there is the desire to beget wisdom (208a-c). Here, the activity of procreation is the engagement of friends in the dialectic. In which case "the bond between them will be more binding [...]" than that which comes of bringing children up, because they have created something lovelier and less mortal than human seed" (209c). Here we see the value of Agathon's insistence on the connection of *eros* and beauty. That is to say, the creative urge is predicated upon erotic desire. Moreover, this urge is to create both in the body and in the soul. Beauty exists both in body and in soul. Beauty is therefore the bridge that connects the physical and psychic manifestations of *eros* (Hyland 50).

This relationship of the physical and psychic is elucidated by Diotima's "heavenly ladder." The first step of this relationship is for one to "fall in love with the beauty of one individual body, so that his passion may give life to noble discourse" (210a). "Next" Diotima explains "he must grasp that the beauties of the body are as nothing to the beauties of the soul" (210b). Thus it is crucial that one start "from individual beauties [...] ever mounting the heavenly ladder, stepping from rung to rung" (211c).<sup>39</sup> Finally, after he has moved from physical beauty to the spiritual, "he will come upon the one single form of knowledge" (210d), i.e. the good. *Eros* is, therefore, what drives the dialectic. *Eros* pulls us through each step of the dialectic until we reach its ultimate goal, the good. However, if the good is the *telos* of *eros* where does that leave beauty? Plato certainly is not implying that they are the same because Diotima and Socrates clearly differentiate between the two. Nonetheless, Plato is certainly putting the two in relation to each other. We can surmise from Diotima's speech that thinking about the beautiful inevitably invokes the question of the good. Each puts the other in question (Hyland 49). Beauty generates further beauty. We are attracted to physical beauty initially, and that experience of beauty results in the generation of further beauty, this time psychic beauty: beautiful speeches and beautiful *logoi*. But what makes us move from the initial physical experience of beauty? It is the component of reason within erotic experience that makes us see that there are eventually higher forms of beauty (Hyland 54). This evidenced by

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<sup>39</sup> So much for Plato's supposed hatred of the body.

the movement after the initial experience of beauty when we experience it embodied by an individual:

First of all [...] he will fall in love with the beauty of one individual body, so that his passion may give life to noble discourse. Next he must consider how nearly related the beauty of any one body is to the beauty of any other, when he will see that if he is to devote himself to loveliness of form it will be absurd to deny that the beauty of each and every body is the same. Having reached this point, he must set himself to be the lover of every lovely body, and bring his passion for the one into due proportion by deeming it of little or of no importance. (210a-b)

Each moment of *eros* is thus infused with reason and thinking (Hyland 54).

Nevertheless, while the process of *eros* is infused with reason, the final experience of beauty and the good are non-discursive:

And, turning his eyes toward the open sea of beauty, he will find in such contemplation the seed of the most fruitful discourse and the loftiest thought, and reap a golden harvest of philosophy, until, confirmed and strengthened, he will come upon one single form of knowledge, the knowledge of the beauty I am about to speak of [...] Nor will his vision of

the beautiful take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh. It will be neither words, nor knowledge [...] (210d-211a)

Thus far, the ascent to beauty has occurred discursively; each transition to a higher stage is accomplished by a process of reasoning. But now, at the highest level, something different is happening. For one thing, it is “sudden,” which suggests the final transition is non-discursive or non- methodological. There is no logos here, it is a sudden epiphany (Hyland 56). Moreover, in Diotima’s account of the insight into beauty, there is actually nothing definitive about beauty; we are told what beauty is not. We are mostly given a generic account of the nature of formal structure. What we do learn is that insight into beauty itself, or into any form, cannot be articulated by any definition, logos, or discursive demonstration (57). This is the meaning of the failure of Plato’s aporetic dialogues. Insight into a form is non-discursive; it is noetic, not dianoetic. Nonetheless, while insights are not demonstrable, we have discourse in light of these insights (58). Furthermore, the insight is not even the final step, as Diotima tells us (211e-212a). Diotima’s point is that insight into forms is not an end in itself; the *telos* of the dialectic is a virtuous way of life. Virtue, though integrally and intimately involved with knowledge and logos, cannot be reduced to these (Hyland 59). Virtue is not a *techne*, which is why Socrates and his various interlocutors are able to define the latter but not the former throughout the dialogues. It also explains why the Philosopher must return to the cave in *Republic*.

However, it is crucial that the methodology of the “heavenly ladder” be observed. This is by no means a trivial misunderstanding, and its consequences extend beyond stumped intellectual growth. The impending political disaster of not adhering to *eros* and not appropriately engaging in the dialectic can be seen in the fate of Alcibiades. After Socrates ends his enactment of Diotima’s speech, a drunken Alcibiades enters the party. He is asked to contribute his own exposition on Love but instead offers a praise of Socrates and describes his failed attempts to seduce Socrates. Alcibiades explains that when he is with Socrates he is smitten with a “philosophical frenzy [...] [a] sacred rage” (218b). However, as Socrates tells Alcibiades, “if you’re trying to barter your own beauty for the beauty you have found in me, you’re driving a hard bargain [...] You’re trying to exchange the semblance of beauty for the thing itself” (218e). Alcibiades is thus working down the ladder by starting with an attraction to Socrates’ spirit and from there moving onto the physical. As Socrates points out, “the mind’s eye begins to see clearly when the outer eyes grow dim - and I fancy yours are still pretty keen” (219a). Consequently, Alcibiades cannot continue along the dialectic and come to contemplate the Good. Historically, Alcibiades would prove to be a hugely controversial figure in the Peloponnesian War. Plato is clearly making a significant point by ending the *Symposium* with Alcibiades, and his contemporary audience, as well any present reader who is versed in history, would have immediately identified its effect. Plato is thus making a direct link between Alcibiades’ failure as a dialectician and his subsequent war crimes. If we do not



grasp the importance of *eros* and the dialectic, Plato warns, we are bound to make the same sort of mistake as Alcibiades.

Dialectic is therefore the discursive joining of two non-discursive moments; an initiating, physical experience and a final, intuitive moment. This is how Plato reconciles discursiveness and non-discursiveness. Alcibiades fails to grasp the importance of the initiating non-discursive moment that represents the first rung of the heavenly ladder, so he is never able to participate in the dialectic. In a way, Alcibiades is obsessed with *logos*. He thinks he can disregard the physical, believing that Socrates can prescribe to him in some formalized way the Forms and the Good, but this is not the case, as Socrates points out, for philosophy is more than *logos*.

## 2.5 Summary

We can thus see how Plato is able to write about *eros* and the beautiful, two non-discursive ideas, using the dialogue's form. Not only does Plato take some interpretive stands on *eros* by way of Diotima, he also illustrates the different paths one can take when approaching *eros*, as can be seen with the various accounts from the different interlocutors. Plato has thus tabled, moderated, and lead the discussion of *eros*.

Moreover, by introducing *eros* and recollection into the discussion, Plato has expanded philosophy beyond the application of *logos*; there is a definite illogical, irrational quality to philosophy. Taking this and his use of the dialogue's form we can

conclude that philosophy is a much more open arena for discussion than Socrates' comments in *Republic*, *Theatetus*, and *Ion* would have us believe. This then opens the possibility for poetry to once again come onto the scene, as we shall explore in the next chapter. Specifically, we will see how poetry can contribute to that initializing, non-discursive moment, thus dissolving the main tension between philosophy and poetry.

### Chapter Three

#### 3.1 Introduction

In Chapter One, we established Plato's alleged problem with poetry and why he thinks philosophy is supposedly better; Socrates claims poetry is irrational and illogical, whereas philosophy provides objective answers with a *logos*. However, in Chapter Two, we deconstructed this notion of philosophy and objectivity, and introduced the role of non-discursiveness. The Forms and the Good, which for Socrates represent the actual objects of knowledge, cannot be known or expressed discursively. So what are we left with? As we saw with *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, Plato is able to take the risk of writing using the dialogues' format, and write philosophy in light of the problem of non-discursiveness. Now in Chapter Three, we shall return to the problem posed by *Ion* and *Republic*; namely, what is the *techné* of poetry, and how can it contribute to the pursuit of knowledge?

Our response can be found by way of Viktor Shklovsky's "Art as Technique" and his definition of poetry as defamiliarization. According to Shklovsky, poetry is not about recreating experiences; it is about challenging our perception of experience. That is to say, the goal of poetry is not to represent a sunflower as facsimile as possible, it is to play with our idea of a sunflower. Poetry, like the dialectic, exposes the individual to his/her own ignorance. Furthermore, poetry pulls the individual from the initial experience of

materiality to the realm of ideas, as explained in the Cave analogy. Therefore, poetry is more than mimesis; it is an occasion for thought, and Plato himself often employs it.

This idea of defamiliarization fits nicely within Platonism, as we can see by the “numbing” of Meno at the hands of Socrates. In the *Meno*, we see one of the strongest examples of the elenchus, as we observe the ways in which Socrates exposes Meno to his ignorance. The elenchus is thus a stance towards experience that prevents us from getting too comfortable in any one belief. This is important because if we cannot have full, discursive knowledge of the Forms and their relations that tie the particulars to them then we cannot possibly have a definitive position on any one issue or concept. Therefore, we must always be willing to change them whenever recalcitrant evidence presents itself. This is what Plato shows us how to do in the dialogues. They are guides to critical thinking. They are metaphysical challenges, encouraging us to be eternal skeptics, but not nihilists.

Likewise, poetry can provide us with a similar opportunity to test our thoughts and positions. Shklovsky’s theory of defamiliarization is analogous to Socrates’ elenchus. We can link the experience of reading poetry as described by Shklovsky with Socrates’ “numbing” of Meno. We will begin this chapter by exploring Shklovsky’s concepts of algebrization and defamiliarization. We then move to Meno to delineate how Socrates “numbs” his interlocutors. Finally, we end by unifying Shklovsky and Plato, dissolving the quarrel between philosophy and poetry.

### 3.2 “Art as Technique”

In “Art as Technique”, Shklovsky describes the “algebrization” of the world, and how poetry can destabilize its effects. Perception, according to Shklovsky, becomes automatic. He states, “If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic [...] Such habituation explains the principles by which, in ordinary speech, we leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed. In this process, ideally realized in algebra, things are replaced by symbols” (778). In our everyday experience of the world and its ontological furniture, we reduce the duration of perception through habit. As a result:

we apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognize them by their main characteristics. We see the object as though it were enveloped in a sack. We know what it is by its configuration, but we see only its silhouette. The object, perceived thus in the manner of prose perception<sup>40</sup>, fades and does not leave even a first impression; ultimately even the essence of what it was is forgotten. (778)

Shklovsky is thus making an important phenomenological claim. We perceive objects not as they are, but reduced to the parameters of our subjectivity, and we do this through habit. Consider, for example, the way in which children experience objects that adults

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<sup>40</sup> This is a technical term for Shklovsky, and will be explained in subsequent paragraphs.

take for granted. A child is the closest thing we know to a *tabula rasa*; accordingly, s/he does not have the same values of worth that adults do for objects. More often than not, a child will ignore an expensive toy set and play with its respective box. A child can said to have a pronounced sense of wonder about the world around him/her. Likewise, wonder, as we shall see, is crucial for the philosophical project.

Shklovsky's point about algebrization is analogous to Socrates' discussion of *eikasia* and its representation in the Cave analogy. *Eikasia* is at the bottom of the line analogy and is traditionally translated as "imagination," but this is problematic. *Eikasia* is better represented in English as "picture-thinking." We can thus conclude that *eikasia* is a subjective, virtual representation of a thing, idea, or concept. Socrates explains:

And if there had been honors and commendations among them which they bestowed on one another and prizes for the man who is quickest to make out the shadows as they pass and best able to remember their customary precedences, sequences, and coexistences, and so must successful in guessing at what was to come, do you think he would be very keen about such rewards, and that he would envy and emulate those who were honored by these prisoners and lorded it among them, or that he feel with Homer<sup>41</sup> and greatly prefer while living on earth to be serf of another, a

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<sup>41</sup> Once again, Socrates draws on a poet to make a point.

landless man, and endure anything rather than opine and live that life?  
(516c-d)

The prisoner's predictions are not based on any kind of understanding of what they observe (i.e. recollection), but only on customary (*eiothei*) sequences, which is to say habit (Dorter 204). It is also significant that Socrates would associate this mode of thinking with chained prisoners observing shadows of objects beyond carried by their captors. Earlier in the *Republic*, Socrates illustrates his distaste for assemblies, courtrooms, and other public gatherings, observing how people aggressively object to things they dislike and loudly champion those they do, and resort to depriving civil rights, imposing fines, and even threatening death upon those who disagree (492a-d).<sup>42</sup> This sort of peer pressure and coercion upon public discourse is represented by the prisoner's enchainment, and the puppeteers represent those who seek to manipulate the discourse towards their own ends (politicians, sophists, etc.) (Dorter 204). Douglas Robinson defines this as the proprioception of the body politic: "this infectious channeling of group norms from one body to another, in the form of verbally or nonverbally signaled ideosomatic pressure to conform to collective expectations" (109). We can thus recognize a similarity of approach between Plato's *eikasia* and Shklovsky's algebrization.

Shklovsky's point about algebrization is that it limits our experience. "After we see an object several times," explains Shklovsky, "we begin to recognize it. The object is

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<sup>42</sup> One must of course take into consideration Socrates' fate, and how this informs Plato's writing.

in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it – hence we cannot say anything significant about it” (“Art as Technique” 779). Shklovsky is drawing a distinction between *videnie*, the Russian for “seeing,” and *uznavanie*, “to be recognizing, to be learning, to be finding out, to be getting to know.” The distinction is that *uznavanie* is associated with repetition (Robinson 119). This type of automatized perception that Shklovsky discusses is similar to Socrates’ point about reminders in the *Phaedrus* and the *Second Letter*; that when someone reads something written s/he will take for it granted and not bother with the lengthy process of recollection.

However, “Art removes objects from the automatism of perception in several ways” (“Art as Technique” 779). Art breaks our habitual experience of the world and forces us to re-examine it. Shklovsky explains how:

Art exists so that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stoney. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important. (778)



What exactly does Shklovsky mean by “unfamiliar” and “defamiliarizing”?<sup>43</sup> As an example, Shklovsky points to “Tolstoy’s way of pricking the conscience” (779).

Shklovsky remarks how “Tolstoy makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object. He describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time. In describing something he avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects” (779).

Shklovsky cites Tolstoy’s “Kholstomer,” in which the narrator is a horse:

I understood well what they said about whipping and Christianity. But then I was absolutely in the dark. What’s the meaning of “his own,” “his colt”? From these phrases I saw that people thought there was some sort of connection between me and the stable. At the time I simply could not understand the connection. Only much later, when they separated me from the other horses, did I begin to understand. But even then I simply could not see what it mean when they called me “man’s property.” The words “my horse” referred to me, a living horse, and seemed as strange to me as the words “my land,” “my air,” “my water.” (779)

Tolstoy is thus defamiliarizing the concept or idea of ownership by describing it through the perspective of a horse, a creature that is supposedly something to be owned. The point is that it is not customary to consider possessions as anything but possessions; how they

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<sup>43</sup> Shklovsky is using the Russian word *ostranenie*, which has been translated as defamiliarization, deautomization, and estrangement.

may exist otherwise does not enter into our habitual perception. Tolstoy forces the reader to reconsider his/her concept of ownership and that which we believe we own. In a way, poetry brings us back to a childlike state by destabilizing all the parameters accumulated over time through habit that we have heaped upon the objects experience. Poetry breaks us from preconceived, habitualized ideas. We think we know something, but poetry exposes our ignorance and tests our presumptions, just as Socrates does with the dialectic.

For Shklovsky, there are two types of imagery: "imagery as a practical means of thinking, as a means of placing objects within categories; and imagery as poetic, as a means of reinforcing an impression" (776). The former, prosaic language, is about simplifying expressions to frictionless statements that convey meaning without giving too much pause for thought, whereas "Poetic imagery is means of creating the strongest possible impression" (776). By "strongest possible impression," he means "affect" or "perception." Consider Gertrude Stein's famous phrase, "A rose is a rose is a rose." Stein's point is that a signifier is multiple things. Accordingly, one can represent a rose prosaically or poetically. One could say, "I am planting roses," meaning s/he is doing some gardening. On the other hand, one could express a rose poetically, such as Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet* when he writes, "a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet" (II.ii, 47-48). Shakespeare is being poetic because he is defamiliarizing the way in which we name things, in that he is drawing attention to the fact that "rose" as a signifier on the actual object: if a roses were called "toses" they would still smell

sweet.<sup>44</sup> The difference is that Shakespeare gives pause for thought and forces the reader to consider the imagery, whereas as the prosaic statement achieves meaning simply and directly. Moreover, when Shklovsky pontificates upon the consequences of algebrization, he is not speaking merely of material objects, but of close human relationships and collective societal norms: "Automatization swallows up things, dress, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" (Robinson 111). "At the foundation of art," writes Shklovsky, "lies a striving to penetrate through to life" (91). Therefore, like Plato's point in the *Seventh Letter* about philosophy's movement beyond language, for Shklovsky the purpose of poetry is to push the reader past language to a reworking of perception.

Shklovsky's use of the terms *ostranenie* and *uznavanie* are appropriate because the estrangement that one feels once a habitual experience has been destabilized can indeed be violent. Robinson warns that Shklovsky does not recognize a form of *ostranenie* that goes too far, that feels "overstrange, nightmarishly surreal, and the resulting depletion of felt connection with individualized collective reality can flip us over into disturbing or disorienting depersonalization" (100). However, arguing for a kinder, gentler *ostranenie* is to miss the point. Returning to the Cave analogy, Dorter writes, "the greatest discontinuity in the cave is between *eikasia* and the other levels, because that is the only point at which the prisoners must be freed from their chains and forcibly turned around" (62). Socrates goes to great lengths to describe the physical

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<sup>44</sup> To step outside of the written word, there is also Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings, which represent flowers in highly eroticized forms, problematizing the viewer's perception of flowers vs. genitalia.

discomfort the prisoner feels when he is released from bondage, exposed to the flame, and subsequently dragged out into the light. Clearly, this is not a comfortable or pleasurable experience. It is thus no coincidence that Socrates often talks about being “courageous” and taking the “risk” of philosophy/dialectic. This experience of the prisoners, the jump from *eikasia*, is very much congruous with Shklovsky’s usage of defamiliarization. The exposure of ignorance and breaking of habit is strange and destabilizing. Accordingly, like Socrates, poets have also been ostracized and blacklisted from society throughout history for controversial writings.

The defamiliarizing quality of poetry is thus analogous to Socrates’ elenchus. The similarities between the two positions can further be elucidated by examining the *Meno* and Socrates’ “numbing” affect on Meno and the Slave Boy.

### 3.3 *Meno*

*Meno* recounts a discussion between Socrates and Meno, who are trying to define virtue. Socrates is confident in the project because, as he explains, those who are “divinely inspired,” such as the priests and poets, assert that we are not born into the material world as blank slates. That is to say, the soul carries with it its past life in and amongst the Forms and the gods, as Plato also explores in the *Phaedrus*. However, the dialogue concludes with an aporia, as Socrates surmises that virtue is not an object of knowledge and therefore cannot be taught.

The dialogue begins with Meno asking, “Can you tell me, Socrates - is virtue something that can be taught? Or does it come by practice? Or is it neither teaching nor practice that gives it to a man but natural aptitude or something else?” (70). To which Socrates admits his “shame that [he has] no knowledge about virtue at all” (71b). We will see this dynamic of question and non-answer throughout *Meno*. Meno is cast as a poor dialectician because he offers none of his own convictions and is constantly demanding answers from Socrates.<sup>45</sup> Plato is demonstrating the attitude of students taught by the Sophists, as Meno was taught by the legendary Gorgias. As such, Meno is hesitant to think on his own and refers either to the supposed authority of Gorgias or simply asks Socrates for the answer (Gordon 101). This also speaks to our previous point about Shklovsky’s algebrization and the body politic and its connection to Socrates’ rant against the bullying by politicians and sophists in the *Republic*. The body politic enforces norms upon individuals, habitualizing them into thinking according to pre-established code. Accordingly, Meno has been automatized by the authority of Gorgias and merely answers out of habit as opposed to thoughtfully. Socrates is trying to pull Meno out of his habitualized thinking, and force him to start thinking about philosophical concepts beyond what has been didactically prescribed to him.

Accordingly, when Socrates pushes Meno for his ideas, Meno provides Gorgias’ definition: “For every act and every time of life, with reference to each separate function, there is a virtue for each one of us, and similarly, I should say, a vice” (72). Meno

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<sup>45</sup> Not unlike Alcibiades in *Symposium*.

explains how there is a virtue for man that is different from the feminine virtue, that of the child, that of the slave, etc. But Socrates is unsatisfied by this because Meno has only given a list of instantiations and not the thing in itself. "What is that character in respect of which they don't differ at all, but are all the same," (72c) Socrates asks. "Even if they are [...] various," Socrates explains, "at least they all have some common character which makes them virtues. That is what ought to be kept in view by anyone who answers the question, What is virtue?" (72d). In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates explains that there are two possible movements in the dialectic, movement from a prior unity to a multiplicity, and from a multiplicity to a unity. In this case, Socrates wishes to pursue the latter. However, as we shall see, this is not possible.

Like many of the other aporetic dialogues, language is the ghost that haunts *Meno*. For example, Meno states, "justice is virtue," to which Socrates replies, "Virtue, do you say, or a virtue?" (73e). Socrates is reminding Meno to be careful not to confuse justice with virtue qua virtue, which is to say, justice is one of several virtues, not virtue itself. This is a confusion of the copula. If I say, "The book is blue," I mean to say it possesses the quality of blue, not that it is itself blue qua blue. But Socrates and Meno can never seem to avoid this dead end. "We always arrive at a plurality," observes Socrates:

but that is not the kind of answer I want. Seeing that you call these many particulars by one and the same name, and say that every one of them is a

shape, even though they are the contrary of each other, tell me what this is which embraces round as well as straight, and what you mean by shape when you say that straightness is a shape as much as roundness. (73d)

It is at this point that the Sophist will throw his/her hands up and claim that there is no absolute measure, so man is the measure; that it is the perceiving subject that determines the nature of the object, which is total relativism.<sup>46</sup> However, this is where Plato takes up arms and launches into battle. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates states:

if anyone nevertheless, through his experience of these arguments which seem to the same people to be sometimes true and sometimes false, attached no responsibility to himself and his lack of technical ability, but was finally content, in exasperation, to shift the blame from himself to the arguments, and spend the rest of his life loathing and decrying them, and so missed the chance of knowing the truth about reality – would it not be a deplorable thing? (90d)

He refuses to be satisfied by the Sophistic position, and asserts that we really do possess the ability to identify virtues and/or forms:

We must not let it enter our minds that there may be no validity in argument. On the contrary we should recognize that we ourselves are still

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<sup>46</sup> This is of course the Platonic treatment of Sophistry, which many scholars have questioned. For our purposes, we are focusing on relativism, as opposed to the Sophistic tradition *per se*.

intellectual invalids, but that we must brace ourselves and do our best to become healthy[...] (90e)

Plato shows as much in *Laches* when Socrates discusses the virtue of courage with his comrades. They have all been accredited for being courageous warriors, and have themselves witnessed courage and cowardice on the field. But, no matter how hard they try they are unable to muster up a satisfactory definition of courage. This is the famous elenchus, but Socratic skepticism should not be taken as misology. Rather, dialectic is a means both to discover one's ignorance and overcome it (Gordon 38). Furthermore, as Socrates observes in the *Theatetus*, philosophy begins with wonder (155d), and wonder stems from *aporia*, a real sense and recognition of ignorance (Gordon 109).

So, the question is, how can one be virtuous if one is not able to articulate it? According to Socrates, it is by the process of recollection. Meno summarizes the problem as such:

But how will you look for something when you don't in the least know what it is? How on earth are you going to set up something you don't know as the object of your search? To put it another way, even if you come right up against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn't know? (*Meno* 80d)



Socrates rejects this and draws on the ideas of the priests and “poets who are divinely inspired” (81b). Socrates explains:

They say that the soul of man is immortal,” “At one time it comes to an end – that which is called death – and at another is born again, but is never finally exterminated [...] Thus the soul, since it is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen all things both here and in the other world, has learned everything that is. (81b-c).

The point here is the same as that in *Phaedrus*. Our souls are immortal and have knowledge of the forms before they are embodied. In *Meno*, Socrates stresses the hermeneutical aspect of recollection by using the Slave Boy demonstration.<sup>47</sup>

Meno refers to this hermeneutical process as a “numbing”:

I think [...] you are exactly like the flat sting ray that one meets in the sea. Whenever anyone comes into contact with it, it numbs him, and that is the sort of thing that you seem to be doing to me now. My mind and my lips are literally numb, and I have nothing to reply to you. Yet I have spoken about virtue hundreds of times, held forth often on the subject in front of large audiences, and very well too, or so I thought. Now I can’t even say what it is. (80)

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<sup>47</sup> The point we are emphasizing here is recollection. The metaphysical investigation of the soul is a separate issue that is not entirely germane to our argument.

Meno spoke of virtue out of habit – a habit that was instilled by Gorgias’ “authority.” However, Socrates has defamiliarized Meno’s idea of virtue leaving him “numb.” Likewise, the Slave Boy has a similar “numbing” experience when Socrates begins quizzing him on geometry. Indeed, the demonstration with the Slave Boy can be interpreted as a microcosm of the *Meno* (Gordon 105). Initially, the Slave Boy claims to know how to solve the geometrical problem that Socrates proposes, but he reaches an impasse soon enough and admits his ignorance. Herein, we see the value of defamiliarization because now the Boy has realized his ignorance and is on the way towards the true answer, which he would not otherwise seek (*Meno* 84). When the Boy has solved the problem, Socrates points out to Meno how he did not give the Boy any new information, but rather pulled it out by asking the appropriate questions. Socrates concludes:

a man who does not know has in himself true opinions on a subject without having knowledge [...] At present these opinions, being newly aroused, have a dreamlike quality. But if the same questions are put to him on many occasions and in different ways, you can see that in the end he will have a knowledge on the subject as accurate as anybody’s. (85c)

Therefore, “if the truth about reality is always in our soul, the soul must be immortal, and one must take courage and try to discover – that is, to recollect – what one doesn’t happen to know, or, more correctly, remember, at the moment” (86b). The dialectic is

thus a process of drawing out knowledge of the Forms by a series of questioning. Recall once again Socrates' point about midwifery in *Theatetus*.<sup>48</sup> There are ideas waiting inside us, and the dialectic brings them to fruition by drawing them out using appropriate questions. As Socrates explains in the *Phaedrus*, a skilled dialectician is able to accommodate each particular individual, establishing his/her needs, and molding the dialectic to fit them.

Unfortunately for Socrates, virtue proves to be more elusive than geometry. Unlike mathematical problems, virtue cannot be formalized into an equation. It cannot be "pinned down," so to speak. As it stands, one can have true opinions of virtue, but not knowledge. If s/he were able to recollect, then s/he could "tie down" his/her true opinions and make them knowledge (98); but the argument keeps slipping out from under them. This gives truth to Socrates' retort to Meno's stingray comparison. Socrates admits, "As for myself, if the sting ray paralyzes others only through being paralyzed itself, then the comparison is just, but not otherwise" (80d). It is not the case that, knowing the answers himself, Socrates goes out into the Agora and perplexes others; rather, he is "infecting" them with his own perplexity. Socrates famously stated that he is the wisest of men because he knows that he does not know anything. In regards to the dialectic, taken at face value, if the process is to first "numb" the participants by making them realize their own ignorance and then eventually lead them towards true knowledge then Socrates is

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<sup>48</sup> "the highest point of my art is the power to prove by every test whether the offspring of a young man's thought is a false phantom or instinct with life and truth" (150c).

successful in the former but a failure in the latter.<sup>49</sup> Like the poet, Socrates' strength is his ability to defamiliarize.

However, this is only the case if we take Plato to be establishing some type of doctrine. Rather, the issue of "Socratic ignorance" needs to be taken seriously. Socrates' ignorance is an epistemic, moral, and pedagogical stance that for him is the starting point for inquiry (Gordon 121). That is not to suggest that Socrates is a nihilist and possesses no commitments of his own; we see his various convictions throughout the dialogues. However, as we have seen, they are multifarious and oftentimes contradictory. This is part of Socratic ignorance. Given his stance, Socrates is always willing to revise his beliefs when a better position reveals itself. As Simmias tells Socrates in the *Phaedo*:

I think, just as you do, Socrates, that although it is very difficult if not impossible in this life to achieve certainty about these questions, at the same it is utterly feeble not to use every effort in testing the available theories, or to leave off before we have considered them in every way, and come to the end of our resources. It is our duty to do one of two things, either to ascertain the facts, whether by seeking instruction or by personal discovery, or, if this is impossible, to select the best and most dependable theory which human intelligence can supply, and use it as a fact to ride the seas of life – that is, assuming that we cannot make our journey with greater confidence and security by the surer means of divine revelation. (85c)

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<sup>49</sup> In the end, Socrates concludes that knowledge of virtue must be distributed by "divine dispensation," (100b) which is elucidated in the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*.

If beliefs, or theories, or ideas are the imperfect vessels by which we navigate the seas of life and experience, dialectic is the means by which we can test their seaworthiness. Socratic ignorance forces us to revise constantly our rafts and grants us the discretion as to whether or we wish to abandon our current vessel for a new, improved one. Socrates defamiliarizes the individual, allowing him/her to see thing anew from a different perspective, expanding their critical gaze.

Shklovsky states:

A poet removes all signs from their places. An artist always incites insurrections among things.

Things are always in a state of revolt with poets, casting off their old names and adopting new names and new faces. A poet employs images as figures of speech by comparing them with each other. For instance, he may call fire a red flower or he may attach a new epithet to an old word, or else, like Baudelaire, he may say that a carcass lifts its legs like a woman with lascivious intent. In this way he brings about a semantic shift. He wrests the concept from the semantic cluster in which it is embedded and reassigns it with the help of the word (figure of speech) to another semantic cluster. We, the readers, sense the presence of something new, the presence of an object in a new cluster. The new word envelops the object, as new clothes envelop a man. The sign has been taken down. This

is one of the ways in which an object can be transformed into something felt, into something capable of becoming the material of and artistic work.  
(Robinson 128)

Thus, according to Shklovsky, the poet disrupts the signifying function of concepts and ideas, much like Socrates. Likewise, the poet, like the philosopher, does so not in order to destroy that function, as the sophists do, but to transform it, to bring to it new life. The poet wrenches an idea from its symbolic order not because s/he is dismissing the idea, or even the possibility of a symbolic order, but to destabilize their relationship so that the reader may explore new possibilities and new orders (Robinson 128).

Therefore, as oxymoronic as it may sound, poetry thus compels us to move beyond picture-thinking. Or, more appropriately, poetry uses imagery as an occasion for thought. Poetry is more than the sensible experience of the image; it is about the ideas the image can stimulate. More specifically, it challenges our preconceived notions about the images' referent. Plato makes similar use of imagery. Indeed, the dialogues are constantly appealing to the visual senses, using images in order for the reader to grasp various ideas. The cave, the line, and the chariot are but a few examples. Plato inspires the reader to contemplate philosophical ideas by drawing from the mutable phenomena of sensible experience. Even when moving beyond the sensible to discuss the forms, Plato still relies on the reader's imagination to construct other worlds and images, as is the case with a dialogue like the *Timaeus* (Gordon 137).

This makes sense if we take seriously Plato's point about the human soul in *Phaedrus*. If we have feet in both camps of the sensible and the ideal, we must then appeal to our sensible if we are to make use of our limited nature. As Socrates states, to speak of the form of the soul would be beyond our purview, however it is within our means to describe it briefly by way of an image (*Phaedrus* 246a). Though an earthly likeness is a dim reminder of the ideal reality, it is a reminder nonetheless. While we are embodied spirits, the only access we have to reality is by way of sensible images. Such is our lot (Gordon 154). Therefore, learning is looking to images (Gordon 148).

Let us return to the Line analogy. Socrates' explanation of the Line is in fact uneven. During his exposition of the visible, Socrates talks about their objects (physical, sensual things), but not about the kind of thinking that corresponds to them, while in his discussion of the intelligible, he explains the nature of the thinking that it represents, but does not say what their objects are. As a result, just as it is problematic to discuss what sort of thinking constitutes *eikasia* and *pistis*, so too is it problematic to determine what kind of objects are intended by *dianoia* and *noesis*. *Dianoia* is especially troublesome because if we can conclude that the objects of *noesis* are the Forms, then where does that leave *dianoia*? It is tempting to assert that the objects of *dianoia* are images of the Forms, but that would mean physical objects, and *dianoia* is purely rational. It is often suggested that the objects of *dianoia* are intermediate mathematical Forms, but *dianoia* is not limited as such. Rather, it is more appropriate to suggest that any form of reasoning that posits and draws consequences from intelligible reality without inquiring into its

foundation is *dianoia*. Socrates uses countless other sources beyond mathematics to facilitate thinking about intelligible realities, most of which being physical things, including the sun, the cave, the chariot, the ladder, pregnancy, and intercourse (Dorter 195-6). Practitioners of *dianoia* use physical models to illustrate their point, but the matter of thought is not the object itself, rather it is the intelligible reality that the model represents. Socrates often uses geometric examples, like the squares in *Meno*, but Socrates is not talking about the particular example, he is trying to speak to the Form of square (Dorter 192-3). Socrates states:

For I think you are aware that students of geometry and reckoning and such subjects first postulate the odd and the even and the various figures and three kinds of angles and other things akin to these in each branch of science, regard them as known, and, treating them as absolute assumptions, do not deign to render any further account of them to themselves or others, taking it for granted that they are obvious to everybody. They take their start from them and pursuing the inquiry from this point on consistently, conclude with that for the investigation of which they set out [...] The very things which they mold and drawn which have shadows and images of themselves in water, these things they treat in their turn as only images, but what they really seek is to get sight of those realities which can be seen only by the mind. (510 c-e)



Therefore, the nature of *dianoia* is to use visible images as a way of thinking about intelligible objects (Republic 510b-d). One could thus argue that the whole purpose of *Republic* is that Plato is creating an image of a city in order to get his readers thinking about the idea of the state. *Republic* as a dialogue can be interpreted as an exercise in *dianoia*.

This is similar to Shklovsky's point about poetic imagery. When a poet wrests a sign from its symbolic field, s/he is trying to engage with the way the reader conceptualizes the sign. In this way, philosophy and poetry are akin insofar as they create images in order to inspire thought.

### 3.4 Summary

We can take Shklovsky's points about defamiliarization as a response to Socrates' challenge poetry in the *Republic*. Poetry does indeed have a *techné*; it is the ability to render objects or concepts unfamiliar to the reader, as is seen with Tolstoy's treatment of ownership. Moreover, we see that Socrates' point about poetry being two steps from reality is incomplete because poetry is more than mimesis. In fact, based on our reading of the *Meno*, we see that philosophy and poetry have much in common. Like Shklovsky's poet who defamiliarizes a reader, Socrates "numbs" an interlocutor. Both contribute to breaking an individual's habitual schema. This break is crucial for it is the first step towards knowledge; it forces the individual to reconsider an idea, and contemplate whether there are better ways of thinking. The defamiliarizing quality of poetry is

*aporetic* in that it exposes the individual to his/her ignorance, consequently generating that feeling of wonder that inspires philosophical thought. If there is an “Ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” it is a sibling rivalry, not a battle between two foes.

### Conclusion

Nonetheless, to refer to the “ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” is to invite the comparison. Arguing that philosophy and poetry have similar goals, as this paper suggests, raises the question of which is better. However, the purpose of this thesis was not to defend poetry against Socrates’ claims; such has already been done by writers such as Iris Murdoch in *The Fire and the Sun*. Rather, our aim was to dissolve the argument all together. Indeed, philosophy and poetry are only quarrelsome when they are caricaturized in extremely polarized fashion, that is to say, when philosophy is perceived merely as the dry, excessively rational pursuit of logos and poetry as the output of an inspired mime.

As we have seen, both poetry and dialectic explore concepts by challenging the individual’s beliefs. In *Ion* and *Republic*, Socrates dismisses poetry because it does not have a *techné* and is two steps removed from reality because it is mimetic. Moreover, Socrates goes on to claim that philosophy is superior because it can provide a *logos* and he is not satisfied with mere images. This is the Socrates that Nietzsche so reviles in *The Birth of Tragedy*; the Socrates that is obsessed with reason and *logos*:

Beside this isolated insight, born of an excess of honesty if not of exuberance, there is, to be sure, a profound illusion that first saw the light of the world in the person of Socrates: the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abyss of being, that

thought is capable of not only knowing being but even of *correcting* it.  
(Nietzsche 95)

Furthermore, the dialogues themselves subvert and undermine Socrates' championing of *logos* with the various *aporetic* endings and grumblings from the interlocutors.<sup>30</sup>

However, *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* show that philosophy cannot, and should not, be reduced to *logos* and discursive reasoning. Both the impetus and *telos* of philosophy are in fact non-discursive, as the discussions of *eros* and recollection show. Plato takes these considerations into account by writing the dialogues such as he does. The dialogues are more staged productions than treatises. The dialogues show dialectic more as a stance towards experience than a list of predicates. Plato is drawing attention more towards the way in which Socrates approaches philosophical discussion than the actual content of his arguments. Certainly there are metaphysical convictions that are being explored here, and there are many positions that are dismissed (e.g. sophistry), but the reader hardly comes away with any sort of catalogue of definitions. Take *Parmenides* for example. If this were meant to be an exposition on Parmenidean philosophy then it is one of the worst ever written; at the end the reader has more questions than answers. Instead, what Plato shows us is a way to be sceptical without being sophistic and misologicistic. It is a conversion to a mode of life.

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<sup>30</sup> Scholars have suggested that this may represent the shift between Socrates and Plato.

And this is what opens up the possibility for poetry to come onto the scene. Because dialectic is bookended by non-discursive experiences, poetry can be of some assistance. As Shklovsky explains, poetry is distinct from prosaic, or discursive, language. Poetry plays with the variability of signifiers to defamiliarize readers, and challenge their beliefs and convictions. This is where poetry and dialectic overlap, as is seen in the *Meno* with Socrates' "numbing." Defamiliarization is like the break that the prisoner experiences at the first step out of the Cave. The reader, like the prisoner, has taken a step beyond *eikasia*, and is now considering ideas and concepts, as opposed to habitualized picture-thinking.

But instead of seeing this as a competition, we should be exploring the ways in which they can work together. Using Platonic terminology, we can use poetry as a *dianoetic* device. The poetic treatment of objects or ideas moves us towards their corresponding Forms. Tolstoy does as much when he discusses ownership in "Kholstomer".<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, Socrates does so in the numerous metaphors and analogies he uses to explain his points. The Kallipolis is the perfect example. The Kallipolis is an image constructed by Socrates to get his interlocutors thinking about justice and the soul, and eventually to draw some conclusions. This is how poetry and philosophy work together. A reader can approach a work of literature dialectically. The poem inspires various ideas and stimulates various beliefs, and the reader can then in turn explore these

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<sup>51</sup> See Chapter 3, page 87.

experiences discursively. But because one can never exhaustively define any of the Forms, the reader can return to a piece repeatedly, finding new paths to explore.

And such is the case with the dialogues. The dialogues are oftentimes bookended by non-discursive, metaphoric imagery. *Republic*, as we discussed in chapter one is a perfect example. Not only does Plato use various images throughout the dialogue, with the Cave and the Line, but he also starts and finishes the dialogues with the two distinctly juxtaposing images of a physical port, the Pireaus, and a spiritual port, the Myth of Er. This is representative of the way in which the dialectic is also bookended by non-discursive moments, as was explored in Chapter Two with *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. Plato is thus showing us how these non-discursive moments can be supplement using poetic images. As Nietzsche states, “Plato has given to all posterity the model of a new art form, the model of the novel [...] in which poetry holds the same rank in relation to dialectical philosophy as this same philosophy held of many centuries in relation to theology; namely, the rank of *ancilla*<sup>52</sup>” (91). The relationship between poetry and philosophy can therefore be a union, not a quarrel.

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<sup>52</sup> Walter Kaufman, translator of *The Birth of Tragedy*, translates *ancilla* as “Handmaid.”

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