

Socratic and Platonic Political Philosophy

PRACTICING A POLITICS OF READING



CHRISTOPHER P. LONG

SOCRATIC AND PLATONIC POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Practicing a Politics of Reading

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates claims to practice the true art of politics, but the peculiar politics he practices involves cultivating in each individual he encounters an erotic desire to live a life animated by the ideals of justice, beauty, and the good. *Socratic and Platonic Political Philosophy* demonstrates that what Socrates sought to do with those he encountered, Platonic writing attempts to do with readers. Christopher P. Long's attentive readings of the *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Apology*, and *Phaedrus* invite us to cultivate the habits of thinking and responding that mark the practices of both Socratic and Platonic politics. Platonic political writing is here experienced in a new way as the contours of a politics of reading emerges in which the community of readers is called to consider how a commitment to speaking the truth and acting toward justice can enrich our lives together.

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Christopher P. Long

The Pennsylvania State University



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*For my students who, semester after semester, remind
me of the transformative power of philosophical words.*

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OVERTURE

Thus it is, Phaedrus my friend, but far more beautiful, I think, is becoming serious concerning these things, when someone uses the dialectical art and, taking a proper soul, plants and sows in it words accompanied by knowledge, words that can defend both themselves and the one who planted them and that are not infertile but have seeds from which others grow in other places, so they come to be eternal and immortal; having them makes a human being as happy as a human can be.

– Phaedrus, 276e4–7a4

The seeds for this book were planted more than a decade ago now, when I first took up the practice of reading the texts of Plato collaboratively with students. In those early courses of my then-young career as a professor of philosophy, “words accompanied by knowledge” were few and far between. The land was arid, and yet, in the course of things, as we took up the texts and began to listen not simply to what they said but also to what they showed and how they made us feel, something fertile began to take root. In dialogue with the texts and with one another, I began to feel the urgency of a question that has come over the course of time to blossom in unanticipated ways in the things written here in this book. The question seemed so straightforward at first: What is the nature of the politics Socrates claims to practice in the dialogues of Plato? This question, it should be noted, is limited in scope, for it asks neither about the historical Socrates nor about Platonic political theory but rather only about how this character, Socrates, appears in the dialogues to practice a peculiar kind of politics with those he encounters. But in the course of trying to put that practice first into words for students and then into writing for potential readers, the practices of

Platonic writing began to emerge as a vivid and powerfully transformative political activity of its own, different from but in many ways analogous to the politics Socrates practices in the dialogues.

Thus, a distinction emerged between the practices of Socratic political speaking and those of Platonic political writing. E. N. Tigerstedt anticipates this distinction when he suggests that Platonic writing is a “meeting of two minds. In the first place, the minds of Socrates and his interlocutor; in the second place, the minds of Plato and his reader.”¹ But the difference between these two relationships is marked by the difference between speaking and writing, so to distinguish between the political activity that plays itself out as Socrates speaks with his interlocutors and that which is at play when Plato writes for his readers, it was necessary to articulate a distinction between the *topology* of Socratic politics and the *topography* of Platonic politics. The topology of Socratic politics names the site, the *topos*, of Socratic saying, *logos*, a space that opens between Socrates and his interlocutors in which the things Socrates says to those with whom he speaks are shown to have profound political effect. Here, however, politics takes on a fundamentally different meaning from what it has in our everyday use of the term; for Socratic politics is enigmatic precisely because it refuses to remain confined within the structures of public institutional authority in which politics has traditionally been practiced. This book is thus in part an investigation of the enigmatic contours of the topology of Socratic politics. However, the course of that investigation has uncovered another, albeit intimately connected, practice of politics at play between the text and its readers. This other politics may be designated the *topography* of Platonic politics: the *topos* of Platonic writing, *graphein*, a space that opens between us and the Platonic text in which the things Plato writes are able to cultivate in us habits of thinking and imaginative response capable of transforming our relationships with one another.

Once the investigation into the topology of Socratic politics uncovered the topography of Platonic politics, it became clear that the research for a book that began in dialogue with students could not itself grow and flourish in isolation. The collaborative readings that seeded the idea of the book would need to be cultivated in public dialogue with a

¹ Tigerstedt, *Interpreting Plato*, 98.

wider community of scholars. Thus, with the help of a Teaching and Learning with Technology Summer Faculty Fellowship in 2009, we created the *Digital Dialogue*, a podcast dedicated to cultivating the excellences of dialogue in a digital age, by inviting a diversity of scholars and students to engage in dialogue about a range of issues connected to the ideas articulated in this book. My thanks go to Cole Campese, then Director of Education Technology Services (ETS) at Penn State, and the team of ETS staff who were part of my Socratic Politics in Digital Dialogue project: Allan Gyorke, Matt Meyer, and Ryan Wetzel, whose early support made the *Digital Dialogue* possible. This book has been enriched by the more than sixty conversations that make up the *Digital Dialogue* podcast at the time of this publication. In a book that argues for an understanding of politics as practiced between individuals and of Platonic politics in particular as practiced between and among a community of readers, it was important to weave the *Digital Dialogue* into the fabric of this book itself. These dialogues ought not to be heard as supplemental to the written text but as integral to establishing a central contention of the book itself: that in collaborative readings attuned to cultivating the excellences of dialogue, truth finds articulation and our relationships with one another can be enriched. Such collaborative readings, however, only become political when they are translated into our everyday life as a committed willingness to engage one another in dialogue animated by those erotic ideals – of justice, the beautiful, and the good – with which Socrates himself remained always concerned. This book, then, with these its dialogues, is offered as an invitation to enter into our continuing dialogue concerning the issues raised here in the hope that such a dialogue will enrich an ever-growing community of readers. Every digital community, however, needs an identifiable and lasting gathering space. To that end, a DOI, or Digital Object Identifier designed to identify, manage, and provide a permanent space of dialogue, has been created for this conversation: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/9781139628891.cplong>.

We begin, thus, neither with a preface nor an introduction, but with an overture, an opening that aims at enriching existing and establishing new relationships. The invitation with which we here begin is supported and facilitated by an online space of communication and collaboration designed to continue the discussion of the issues with which this book is

concerned and, indeed, to put the ideas articulated here into concrete practice. The *Digital Dialogue* podcast will continue to be produced as one dimension of this ongoing digital community of readers, but to it will be added responses, be they written, heard, seen, or experienced through other modes of digital and interpersonal communication related to the questions about dialogue, politics, and the power of words raised by this book. In this sense, the book itself has been written not only as a product of academic scholarship, which I hope it shows itself in any case to be, but as a “seed from which others grow in other places.”

A DIALOGICAL HERMENEUTIC

If the methodology according to which this book unfolds must be identified here at the beginning, it is perhaps best to speak in terms of a dialogical hermeneutic. Although in suggesting this here, it is advisable to pause a moment to recall the words from Hegel's famous *Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit*: "For the thing itself [*die Sache Selbst*] is not exhausted by stating it as an aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about."¹ One might extend this by suggesting that with reference to this book, the thing itself is not only the result together with the process through which it came about but also the process and the result together with the relational possibilities the thing itself opens for the future. If reading, as will be heard, is a collaborative practice, political in nature, the writing of this book must become an invitation to the practice of collaborative reading. The book has, in a sense, been written in collaboration with its potential community of readers and in ongoing and living dialogue with the texts handed down to us under the authorship of a certain "Plato." To turn in earnest to these texts is, however, a matter of depth and complexity, for they do not only speak for themselves. They are appropriated, inevitably, by each new generation, and with each generation comes a new set of concerns, new ears to hear and eyes to read, together.

Of course, layers of interpretive sediment stand between us and the Platonic texts. This sediment cannot but determine the lens through which we ourselves read, a lens that refracts the light and so inevitably

¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 2.

frustrates the dream of unhindered access, of pure vision and ultimate insight. At the same time, however, it is only through this refracted lens that the texts are accessible to us at all. So if we are to turn in earnest to these texts, it will have to be with an acute awareness of our own historicity, of the extent to which we too will, in reading them, contribute to the history of their appropriation – which means we will contribute as much to their alteration as to their preservation. To appropriate, indeed, is to attempt to articulate what is proper to the text itself. But this does not mean simply to take over what is proper to the text for one's own purposes; rather, it means to enter into relation with the text in a way that allows the text to articulate what is proper to it. Reading is thus always a kind of appropriation – the attempt to articulate what is proper to each thing; and a good reading is one animated by an attuned and attentive engagement with the text rooted in a concern to do justice to what is articulated there.²

To recognize the historical context in which our readings of these texts necessarily unfold, however, is not to mute the voice they articulate. Indeed, the hermeneutic recognition of finitude is the only possible basis from which the texts can be permitted to speak to us *for themselves*. Although this hermeneutical approach is dialogical, its structure is threefold; for it emerges from the complex site of textual interpretation in which the interpreter takes up a text that is itself already somehow at work in the history within which it is encountered.

First, from the side of the interpreter, there is always a certain prejudice that conditions all understanding. This is not, of course, the blind prejudice that so often stands between beings to inhibit genuine understanding. Rather, it is what Gadamer has called “justified [*berechtigte*] prejudices productive of knowledge.”³ Such justified, or as Richard Bernstein calls them “enabling,”⁴ prejudices point to the finite

² For a discussion of the notion of appropriation in the sense used here, see Martin Heidegger, “The Way to Language,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1993). There Heidegger plays on the vocabulary of *das Eigene*, that which is a thing's “own,” in order to develop the notion of *Ereignis*, which names the event of presencing in which each thing expresses itself as itself. See too Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, 36–8, 249.

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1994), 279.

⁴ Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 128.

way we humans exist in the world. We enter each encounter – be it with another living or inanimate being or, indeed, with a written text – with a certain pre-understanding that itself serves as the basis for new knowledge. Gadamer calls this “*eine berechtigte Vorurteile*,” a justified prejudice, because it has been tested – indeed risked – in genuine encounter. Yet this risk always involves the possibility that the very prejudice that enables understanding can become a blind, disabling prejudice when it closes itself off from the voice of that which it seeks to understand. Thus, from the side of the interpreter, there is always a dimension of prejudice operative in the hermeneutic encounter with the text, a prejudice over which we must remain vigilant if what enables understanding itself is not to become precisely what prevents it.

A second dimension of a dialogical hermeneutics thus emerges from the side of the text; for there is a certain authority that arises from its inability to respond dynamically to the encounter with its interpreter. Plato makes Socrates speak to this issue in the *Phaedrus*:

In a way, Phaedrus, writing has a strange character, which is similar to that of painting, actually. Painting’s creations stand there as though they were alive, but if you ask them anything, they maintain a quite solemn silence [*semnōs panu sigai*]. Speeches are the same way. You might expect them to speak like intelligent beings, but if you question them wanting to learn something about what they’re saying, they always just continue saying the same thing. Every speech, once it’s in writing, is bandied about everywhere equally among those who understand and those who’ve no business having it. It doesn’t know to whom it ought to speak and to whom not. When it’s ill-treated and unfairly abused, it always needs its father to help it, since it isn’t able to help or defend itself by itself.⁵

The persistent, repetitive response of written texts is equated here with a kind of silence, indeed, a “solemn silence” (*semnōs panu sigai*) in response to insistent questioning. The solemnity of this silence gives rise, strangely enough, to a certain authority. Although the authority of the text is often transferred to that of the author, whose intentions are allegedly legible in the text itself, the authority of the text derives not

⁵ *Phaedrus*, 275d–e. All references to Plato throughout the text are taken from Plato, *Platonis Opera*, 1995. Translations are my own.

from the genius of its author but from precisely the absence of its so-called father, that is, from its fundamental inability to “defend itself by itself.”⁶ The authority of the text arises from its very helplessness, from its dependence, from what Emmanuel Levinas has called its “abasement.” In speaking of our relation to the “Other,” Levinas suggests the dynamic by which we might best understand how the authority of the text, its “height,” is rooted also in its abasement: “The Other qua Other is situated in a dimension of height and of abasement – glorious abasement; he has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and at the same time, of the master called to invest and justify my freedom.”⁷ For Levinas, the urgent need to justify my freedom is the very expression of conscience: “Conscience welcomes the Other. It is the revelation of a resistance to my powers that does not counter them as a greater force, but calls in question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being. Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself arbitrary and violent.”⁸ The authority of the text makes itself felt as resistance to my freedom, as a persistent, repetitive insistence that calls the arbitrariness, indeed, the violence of my freedom into question. As Gadamer reminds us, genuine authority is not based on blind obedience or an abdication of reason, but on an act of recognition and knowledge (*in einem Akt der Anerkennung und der Erkenntnis*).⁹ The text takes on solemn authority not because of our blind obedience but because of our conscientious recognition that it has something important to say to us, indeed, to teach us. The second dimension of dialogical hermeneutics thus involves entering into relation with the text prepared to be taught.

Finally, the historically determined context in which this teaching occurs draws into focus the third dimension of the threefold structure of

⁶ We do well, here, to attend, as Derrida suggests, to the metaphors deployed; for as he writes: “It is all about fathers and sons, about bastards unaided by any public assistance, about glorious, legitimate sons, about inheritance, sperm, sterility. Nothing is said of the mother, but this will not be held against us.” See Derrida, *Dissemination*, 143. The vocabulary of the “father” is here “so-called” in order precisely to raise the question of the mother or to call into question the manner in which the “father” functions as authoritative. For more on this, see Long, “The Daughters of Metis.”

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 251.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 284.

dialogical hermeneutics. This dimension is a matter of great complexity insofar as it involves the long tradition from which the text emerges and within which it continues to operate. This tradition is not merely handed down, imposed upon us, or indeed given as something simply to be celebrated; rather, it must be conscientiously taken up, appropriated, criticized, embraced, and thus also preserved. Tradition does not operate with an inertia of its own; rather, it is a communal creation, inter-generationally maintained and transformed. The tradition into which we have been thrown thus presents itself to us as a task, or better in German, *als eine Aufgabe*, as an assignment to be done. In this sense, tradition indeed imposes itself upon us not merely as a burden passively borne but as a task actively undertaken, as a call that invites imaginative response; for it is only in this response, in our collective responses, that the tradition is preserved as transformed.

The dynamic relation articulated in the threefold structure of dialogical hermeneutics – interpreter, text, and context – expresses a kind of existential hermeneutical responsibility in which precisely the ability to respond to the things we encounter is the very process by which the past is appropriated, the present comes to presence, and new possibilities for the future are opened. Already here, something of the dynamic of dialogical encounter that animates Socratic politics may be discerned, for this is precisely what Socrates asks of each individual he encounters. Socrates seeks to cultivate in individuals an ability to respond critically to the ideas and opinions they have inherited in order to respond to the present situation in ways that open new possibilities for the future rooted in a concern for what is just and beautiful and good. Thus, in bringing a dialogical hermeneutic to bear on Platonic texts, we seek to cultivate in ourselves and with one another those excellences of dialogue at the root of the activity that is Socratic philosophy. These philosophical activities, however, set us on a decidedly political path only when we allow those cultivated hermeneutical habits of reading to inform our habits of acting.

THE ITINERARY

The itinerary this book traverses leads from politics to philosophy only ultimately to return from philosophy to an expanded sense of politics. It begins by attending to the practices of Socratic political speaking in the *Protagoras*, where we find Socrates concerned both with the course of the life of his young associate, Hippocrates, and with the arc of his own. Here we discern the contours of the topology of Socratic politics as a situated space of appearing determined by a sense of the proper time. We turn, then, to the *Gorgias*, where Socrates attempts to establish a philosophical friendship with Gorgias and, in the process, performs the “true art of politics” of which he speaks in that dialogue.¹ This course of investigation leads us, then, to the *Phaedo*, which is itself the fulcrum of the book, because in it the practices of Socratic political saying are heard to be tightly bound up with the practices of Platonic writing, the two being decisively determined by what Socrates calls the “caring practice of dying,” namely, philosophy. If the path from the *Protagoras* through the *Gorgias* to the *Phaedo* traces the manner in which Socratic politics is itself a way of practicing philosophy, the path from the *Phaedo* through the *Apology* and into the *Phaedrus* traces the manner in which Platonic philosophical writing performs a kind of politics. The *Phaedo* presents us with Socrates as a Platonic ideal that finds further articulation in the *Apology*, a text crafted in ways that uncover how Platonic writing is able to cultivate in readers the political habits of attentive listening, critical distance, and comfort with ambiguity. This leads, finally, to the *Phaedrus*, where the transformative power of collaborative reading is

¹ *Gorgias*, 521d6–e2.

shown to have identifiable political implications. Having traversed this path of inquiry leading from the political practices of Socratic saying to those of Platonic writing, we will be in a position to suggest how the Socratic ideal informs the practices of Platonic political writing in ways that cultivate in us readers habits of thinking and imaginative response capable of enriching the possibilities of human political life.

This book has been a collaborative endeavor. As mentioned, it grew over time in discussion with a generation of college students in courses I have taught both at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey and, since 2004, at The Pennsylvania State University. The book is dedicated to them because they taught me, year after year, to trust the power of words to transform the lives of individuals and the communities in which we live. My research for this book was further enriched by the many guests I have had on the *Digital Dialogue* podcast. I list them here in order of their appearance and thank them all for their willingness to risk engaging in public dialogue with me in a medium with which many were unfamiliar: Michael Brownstein, Joshua Miller, Marina McCoy, Leigh Johnson, Shannon Sullivan, Jill Gordon, Christopher Johnstone, Mark Munn, Sara Brill, John Christman, Holly Moore, John Lysaker, Rose Cherubin, Noelle McAfee, Adriel Trott, Michael Shaw, Axelle Karera, Nicolas Parra, students in my Fall 2009 PHIL200 course, Robert Bernasconi, Emma Bianchi, Jeremy Engels, Jaimie Oberdick, Kathryn Gines, Leonard Lawlor, Falguni Sheth, Richard Lee, Jr., Ryan Drake, Anne-Marie Schultz, Robert Metcalf, Sean Kirkland, Mark Shifmann, Matt Jordan, Sam Richards, Laurie Mulvey, Vincent Colapietro, Francisco Gonzalez, Walter Brogan, Sergio Ariza, Norman Mora, Josh Hayes, Cori Wong, Claire Colebrook, Karen Gover, Kalliopi Nikolopoulou, Tom Tuozzo, Mark Fisher, Ronald Sunstrom, Jessica Harper, Vance Ricks, Christopher Moore, Catherine Zuckert, Cynthia Willet, Shannon Winnubst, Lee Skallerup Bessette, Jarah Moesch, Rebecca Goldner, and Craig Eley. The writing and research for the book were also facilitated at various stages by three research assistants: Sabrina Aggelton, Lisa Lotito, and Sara Treumann. Since much of this book was written during my tenure as Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies in the College of the Liberal Arts, special thanks go to my excellent

staff, who always handle their jobs efficiently and professionally and who always respected my need to continue my academic research, especially my assistant, Billie Moslak, who protected my “work time” and guarded my door like Cerberus, refusing to be charmed by any Orpheus other than the dean herself.

Of course, ultimately, this book and all my work and everything I do is for my wife, Valerie Long, and my two daughters, Chloe Aliza and Hannah Aveline. As this book developed and grew, so too did our two little girls, learning now to write and read themselves, always under Val’s patient, wise, and caring tutelage. During that time, we have read together many beautiful, magical stories, and I have learned in reading with them the power words have to open new possibilities of relation and enrich this finite life we share together.

1 POLITICS AS PHILOSOPHY

Writing to Karl Jaspers in a letter dated July 1, 1956, Hannah Arendt suggests that since the trial of Socrates, politics and philosophy have been in conflict. Plato's response to the city's indictment was, she says, "so powerful that we have measured against it everything that has been said on this subject since. What Socrates presumably had to say on the subject has been almost completely forgotten."¹ By locating the original conflict between philosophy and politics in Plato's response to the trial of Socrates and by suggesting that behind this response lurks the more originary position of a forgotten Socrates, Arendt reinforces an orthodoxy that divorces Platonic from Socratic political philosophy.² This position is more fully articulated in a later essay titled "Philosophy and Politics," in which Arendt argues that in the wake of the trial, Plato

¹ Arendt and Jaspers, *Correspondence 1926–1969*, 288–9. Care here is required, for Arendt warns Jaspers in that letter that "[w]e'll have to talk about Plato. In the short space of a letter everything leads to misunderstanding." Here already, a space opens between speaking and writing.

² This orthodoxy finds its strongest expression in those who, like Gregory Vlastos, seek to establish a strong distinction between Platonic philosophy and the historical Socrates. See, for an early example, Vlastos, *The Philosophy of Socrates*. For a later example, see Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. For a collection of essays that attempt to retrieve the historical Socrates, see Benson, *Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates*. For an explicit attempt to reconstruct the political practices of the historical Socrates in the context of his trial and death, see Brickhouse and Smith, *The Trial and Execution of Socrates: Sources and Controversies*. In his book *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, Kahn takes a different tack when he recognizes the tight connection between Plato and Socrates: "In Plato's work the presence of Socrates is overwhelming. Out of twenty-five or more dialogues, Socrates is absent from only one: the *Laws*." Further, he writes: "So, from Plato's point of view, there is no fundamental discrepancy between the philosophy of Socrates and that of Plato himself." See Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 71 and 100.

turned decisively against rhetoric, that art of persuasion the Athenians considered truly political. There she writes: “The spectacle of Socrates submitting his own *doxa* [opinion] to the irresponsible opinions of the Athenians, and being outvoted by a majority, made Plato despise opinions and yearn for absolute standards.”³ For Arendt, then, the trial of Socrates is the trauma that turned Plato into a Platonist and set philosophy so decisively against politics.

Perhaps, however, the ancient conflict between philosophy and politics might better be located in the attempts to distill a systematic Platonism from the dramatic dialogues than in the psychological experience of a traumatized Plato. A reading of the dialogues more attuned to the political dimensions of the practices of Platonic dramatic writing might uncover a more intimate connection between philosophy and politics. If the most compelling articulation of what Socrates himself had to say about the relationship between politics and philosophy has itself been written by Plato, the strict delineation between a Platonic and a Socratic account is unsustainable, and the route to a philosophy more deeply political in its practices lies not beyond but through Plato’s attempt to write, as the *Second Epistle* has it, a Socrates “become beautiful and new.”⁴

The figure of Socrates depicted in Plato’s dialogues articulates and embodies a practice of philosophy that is intimately political. Leo Strauss puts it this way:

One could say that Plato’s dialogues as a whole are less the presentation of a teaching than a monument to the life of Socrates – to the core of his life: they all show Socrates engaged in his most important work, the awakening of his fellow men and the attempting to guide them toward the good life which he himself was living.⁵

³ Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 74. In her essay, *What Is Authority*, Arendt suggests that what drives this turn away from persuasion after the death of Socrates is a desire for something more compelling that could move humans without violence. In this context, Arendt writes: “Very early in his search he must have discovered that truth, namely, the truths we call self-evident, compels the mind, and that this coercion, though it needs no violence to be effective, is stronger than persuasion and argument.” See Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, 107–8.

⁴ *Second Epistle*, 314c4.

⁵ Strauss and Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy*, 7.

At its core, the life of Socrates is the practice of philosophy as a peculiar kind of politics. The politics Socrates practices involves the attempt to awaken each individual he encounters to the question of the good in order thereby, in turn, to transform the city itself by cultivating in the individuals belonging to it an erotic desire for the best. Socrates' "most important work" is thus political not in the sense that it seeks to influence the multitude and gain ruling authority over the city but in the sense that it seeks to turn the course of the life of each individual toward the question of the good so as to transform the life of the community to which together they belong.

Yet if Strauss is right to emphasize the political dimensions of the practices of Socratic philosophy, like Arendt, he too reinforces the orthodox division between Socratic and Platonic political philosophy by insisting that "the political teaching of Plato is accessible to us chiefly through" the *Republic*, the *Statesman*, and the *Laws*.⁶ These dialogues are, to be sure, the *locus classicus* of Platonic as opposed to Socratic political philosophy, for each in a different way seems to be concerned with the traditional question of political rule and the operations endemic to the art of politics. Of the three, the *Republic* comes closest to blurring the boundary between Socratic and Platonic politics because, unlike the *Statesman* and the *Laws*, it is a performance of Socratic political speaking narrated by Socrates himself. Insofar as the *Republic* presents Socrates as concerned to turn Glaucon toward the question of the just so that it might animate his life and his relationships with others, the *Republic* depicts something decisive about the practice of Socratic political philosophy: it illustrates the extent to which the things Socrates says are capable of transforming the lives of the individuals he encounters.⁷ Despite the manner in which the *Republic* is carefully crafted as a dramatic depiction of the practices of Socratic politics, it has long been read as an articulation of Platonic political theory.⁸ Although Strauss himself is careful to delineate the political things Socrates says in the *Republic*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ For a reading of the *Republic* that seeks to trace the practices of Socratic political speaking along these lines, see Long, "Socrates and the Politics of Music: Preludes of the Republic."

⁸ Karl Popper is one of the most influential scholars to take this tack with the *Republic*. See Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. I. Martha Nussbaum follows Popper in identifying the positions articulated in the *Republic* directly with Plato as opposed to Socrates. See Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, chapter 5.

from the political teachings Plato writes into it, by identifying the *Republic* with the *Statesman* and the *Laws* as the chief dialogues through which Plato's political philosophy can be discerned, he reinforces the received orthodoxy in which Socratic political speaking and Platonic political writing are taken to articulate two fundamentally different ways of understanding the relationship between philosophy and politics.⁹ The *Statesman*, in which Socrates is largely silent, and the *Laws*, in which he does not appear, preclude any attempt to understand the complex connection between the practices of Socratic political speaking and those of Platonic political writing. To look chiefly to these three dialogues for insight into Plato's political teaching is at once to presume a decisive disjunction between Socratic and Platonic politics and to underestimate the tremendous transformative power of Platonic writing. If, however, Plato's philosophical writing is recognized as political in the spirit in which Socrates' philosophical speaking is shown to be political, then focusing on these three dialogues obscures Plato's political teaching even if they reveal a political theory that might be ascribed to a certain Platonism.¹⁰

A return to those dialogues that most eloquently articulate the manner in which Socrates practices politics with those he encounters will go some significant distance toward rehabilitating the relationship

⁹ Adopting the orthodox division of Plato's works into early, middle, and late, Klosko, for example, insists that with the *Republic* Plato advocates a "programme of education" far different from what is found in the early dialogues. He goes on to suggest: "[t]hese changes in Plato's moral psychology force him to move beyond Socratic politics as well." See Klosko, *The Development of Plato's Political Theory*, 61.

¹⁰ The suggestion here is not that we can learn nothing about Platonic politics from the *Republic*, the *Statesman*, and the *Laws* but only that when we focus our attention largely or exclusively on these dialogues, attempting to distill from them "Plato's Political Theory," we miss the way Platonic writing affects the reader in ways analogous to the manner in which Socratic speaking affected those he encountered. Once a sense for the political nature of Platonic writing is discerned in dialogues that are less overly political in the traditional sense, perhaps a deeper appreciation of the political nature of those three political writings might come more clearly into focus. For a good example of a book that focuses on the *Statesman* but does not divorce too strongly Platonic politics from the drama that is Socrates' philosophical life, see Howland, *The Paradox of Political Philosophy: The Philosophical Trial of Socrates*. Even so, here we follow the advice of Arlene Saxonhouse, who writes: "If we are to look for Plato's 'political philosophy' we must look elsewhere than in the *Republic*, or even the *Statesman*. Perhaps the most powerful statement appears in the *Gorgias*." See Saxonhouse, "Comedy in Callipolis: Animal Imagery in the *Republic*," 900. She goes on to appeal to *Gorg.* 521d, a provocative text central to the present study, in which Socrates claims that he is one of the few to truly try his hand at the political art.

between philosophy and politics by illustrating the extent to which Socratic political speaking and Platonic political writing are intimately bound up with one another, although they remain distinct in identifiable ways. A rehabilitation of the relationship between philosophy and politics would, in turn, re-establish their ability to work together to a powerful transformative effect. When politics is practiced as philosophy, questions of power, authority, and action are anchored by and held accountable to the ongoing philosophical dialogue concerning what is just and beautiful and good. When philosophy is practiced as politics, on the other hand, questions of the just, the beautiful, and the good no longer pose themselves as mere abstractions divorced from the world of human community; rather, the questions are lived and thus become capable of animating and enriching the course and nature of our relationships with one another.

These three ideals – the just, the beautiful, and the good – are erotic in a specific, Platonic sense: they awaken in us a desire for that which, as finite beings, we cannot fully achieve.¹¹ Platonic *eros* is thus neither emotion nor appetite; it is rather a way of being oriented toward what is desirable but beyond our capacity wholly to grasp. The transformative political power of erotic ideals thus lies in their ability to wrest us from impoverishing habits of relation by calling us to imagine more just, beautiful, and better possibilities of human community. The erotic ideals of justice, beauty, and the good are emphasized here because they each designate a different dimension of the complex interconnection between the practices of Socratic political speaking and those of Platonic political writing. The just is the ideal that directs us to consider the nature of our relationships with one another and the impact our words have on the world we share in common. The beautiful is the ideal that shines forth in words well said and actions well done; beauty can awaken us to what is enriching in our relationships. The good, for its

¹¹ Gordon puts it in the language of wholeness: “[E]ros is a desire for being and wholeness, from which the human soul has been alienated from the beginning. Eros signals both our connectedness to and our alienation from an original condition among noetic objects.” See Gordon, *Plato’s Erotic World*, 6. This formulation nicely articulates the manner in which *eros* expresses a dimension of connection and alienation. However, the political power of *eros* is not rooted in a nostalgia for a lost origin we never had, but rather in committed attempts to weave the ideals of justice, beauty, and the good into community with one another.

part, is the ideal of ideals insofar as it holds justice and beauty accountable to a yet wider and more elusive ideal capable of reminding us that each attempt to do justice and articulate the beautiful in our relationships with one another is a response to the living question of the good.¹² If Socratic politics is a practice of justice in which words oriented toward the truth become capable of transforming the lives of individuals, Platonic politics is an aesthetic practice in which the written figure of a Socrates made beautiful becomes capable of transforming the habits of readers who encounter it. Together the practices of Socratic political saying and those of Platonic political writing are animated ultimately by an erotic orientation toward the good, which remains itself ever elusive as a determinate idea. Yet precisely because of this erotic elusiveness, the good is capable of enriching the world of human affairs for those who, like Socrates and Plato both, are committed to speaking and writing words oriented “toward the best,” as Socrates puts it so poignantly in the *Gorgias*.¹³ To orient our words and thus also our actions toward the best is to recognize the power of the good as an erotic ideal. As erotic, the good draws us to it; as an ideal, it remains in principle beyond our human capacity to grasp. The good is thus at once elusive and alluring. Its transformative political power comes not to those who pretend to possess it but rather only to those who recognize that the source of its power lies in the way it requires each new generation to take it up as a question and work it out in living dialogue together.¹⁴

PLATONIC POLITICAL WRITING

This, ultimately, is the lesson Plato seeks to write into the *Phaedo*, that profoundly political dialogue in which Socrates enjoins his colleagues not to become misologues despite their disappointment that the *logoi* establishing the immortality of the soul have proven inconclusive.

¹² Arendt rightly recognizes the good as having a privileged place in the depiction of Socrates presented in the dialogues. See Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 77.

¹³ *Gorgias*, 521d6–e2.

¹⁴ This particular way of articulating the distinction between the just, the beautiful, and the good emerged in conversation with Catherine Zuckert; listen to Long, Christopher P., “Digital Dialogue 54: Plato’s Philosophers” (http://www.cplong.org/digitaldialogue/digital_dialogue_54_platos_philosophers/).

There, as will be shown in [Chapter 4](#), the philosophical community is saved and sustained by the poignant way Socrates faced his own death without fear or anxiety and yet also without certain grasp of the very ideals according to which his life was lived. The *Phaedo* is a performance of the philosophical practice of politics on two levels. On the topological level of Socratic political speaking, the dialogue illustrates how a shared commitment to articulating the truth in the face of the ultimate uncertainty of death can rehabilitate a community beset by its own desires for certainty in an irreducibly uncertain world. On the topographical level of Platonic political writing, the *Phaedo* is crafted in ways that compel us readers to reconsider the arc and course of our own lives in response to the Socratic ideal with which the dialogue confronts us. The *Phaedo* is set in the center of this book precisely because it illustrates the manner in which Socratic political saying is deeply intertwined with Platonic political writing, for what Socrates does with his colleagues in the prison cell Plato seeks to do with generations of readers who have encountered the text since its original writing.¹⁵

Already in that provocative letter to Dionysius of Syracuse that has been handed down to us under the title *Plato's Second Epistle*, the figure of an idealized Socrates is said to be at the heart of Platonic writing. The passage in which this is articulated suggests the intimate connection between the things Socrates says and those Plato writes:

The greatest precaution is not to write but to learn thoroughly; for it is not possible for things written not to come out [*ekpesein*]. On account of these things I have never written concerning these things; there is no writing [*suggramma*] of Plato, nor will there be; the present [writings] are the sayings [*ta de nun legomena*] of a Socrates become beautiful and new.¹⁶

¹⁵ In her book *Turning Toward Philosophy*, Jill Gordon emphasizes the performative nature of Plato's writing and the manner in which it is designed to do things to and with the reader. Gordon, *Turning Toward Philosophy*.

¹⁶ *Second Epistle*, 314b7–c4. The question of the authenticity of *Plato's Letters* may here be bracketed, for whether Plato wrote the letter is less important than the fact that the distinctions made in the text were given voice already in antiquity. It is worth noting, however, that the letters seem to have been widely accepted as genuine in antiquity, but that this judgment has been “almost completely reversed in modern times with the rise of critical historical methods.” See Morrow, *Plato's Epistles*, 6. One need look no further than Alcidas' short essay *On Those Who Write Written Speeches*, which argues that writing is parasitic on speaking to recognize that the affordances and limitations of writing and

The passage introduces a distinction between the writing (*suggramma*) of Plato and the sayings (*legeomena*) of Socrates only then to draw them into intimate connection with one another.¹⁷ The concern voiced in the text that things written necessarily “come out” seems to enjoin the strategy by which the writings of Plato are rooted in the things Socrates says. Plato’s attempts to write a Socrates “become beautiful and new” thus become a deeply political activity precisely because everything Socrates is made to say to those he encounters in the dialogues is animated by the peculiar politics he says he practices in the *Gorgias*, a politics rooted in, as mentioned, the attempt to speak “toward the best.”

The figure of Socrates Plato’s dialogues depict lives a life at once philosophical and political. Socrates thus himself appears in the dialogues in ways that enjoin us to reconsider the nature of a philosophical life and the meaning of what it is to be a citizen. Because he is shown to live an inherently political philosophical life, the very depiction of Socrates in the dialogues subverts any attempt to understand the activity of philosophy as divorced from the practical life of the citizen. And yet the picture Plato writes of Socrates is that of a philosophical life lived largely in dialogue with individuals. Indeed, the only dialogue that sets Socrates in a traditionally political context is the *Apology*, a text in which Socrates seems to distance his own activity from the attempt to do political things. Thus when he addresses the “men of Athens” gathered to hear his defense against charges that will ultimately cost him his life, Socrates insists that those who really fight for justice must do so in private:

Know well, men of Athens, that if long ago *I* attempted to do political things, I should have died long ago, and benefited neither you nor myself. And do not be angry with me for speaking the truth;

speaking were living questions around the time Plato chose to take up writing. See Muir and Alcidamas, *The Works and Fragments*.

¹⁷ To address what Bluck calls the awkwardness of the formulation, “τὰ δὲ νῦν λεγόμενα,” the present translation follows his suggestion that one “might find a contrast between λεγόμενα and σύγγραμμα” in the text such that a distinction is voiced between Platonic writing and Socratic saying. Bluck then suggests the following translation: “There is no *treatise* by Plato περὶ τούτων, and the present works (τὰ δὲ νῦν) are simply *sayings* of a re-furbished Socrates”; Bluck, “The Second Platonic Epistle,” 150. Bluck leaves “concerning these things” in the Greek, “περὶ τούτων,” because precisely the things to which the text refers is a matter of debate: it refers either to the nature of first principles discussed earlier in the letter (313a) or, as Bluck prefers, to the general matters discussed between Plato and Dionysius.

for no human-being will be saved who opposes either you or any other multitude and prevents many unjust and illegal things from happening in the city. But it is necessary for the one who really fights for justice to practice privately [*idiōteuein*], not publically [*dēmo-sieuein*], if one is to survive even a short time.¹⁸

The truth Socrates speaks here is that justice is a private practice, to which he juxtaposes a certain way of being public. That this claim is made in a context in which Socrates is provoking those gathered to reconsider the very nature of the politics they practice should not minimize the importance of the attempt to recast the difference between public and private life. If the immediate point of the passage is to call attention to the dangers endemic to the attempt to speak the truth and fight for justice in public, its deeper implication is to insist that even in our most private encounters, the question of justice is at stake. In suggesting this, however, Socrates does not dissolve the difference between the public and the private. He does, however, blur its boundaries in such a way that a citizen's private actions can no longer be divorced from wider responsibilities to the larger community to which the citizen belongs.¹⁹

Socrates' eloquent insistence here in the *Apology* that justice is not simply a public question of political exigency but also and more fundamentally an idiosyncratic question of broad philosophical significance suggests that the traditional relationship between philosophy and politics needs recasting even as it enjoins a reconsideration of political activities in light of the citizen's deepest philosophical commitments. It would be no exaggeration to suggest that the manner in which Socrates subverted the traditional boundary between the public and the private set him against the standard practices of Athenian politics, nor would it be too much to say that the idiosyncratic politics Socrates practiced provoked the Athenians in ways that ultimately cost him his life.²⁰ This provocation

¹⁸ *Apology*, 31d5–32a3.

¹⁹ Dana Villa recognizes that Socrates does not collapse the difference between the public and the private. Villa emphasizes the manner in which Socrates thus introduces moral individualism as a standard of civic obligation. For Villa, Socrates' subversion of the distinction allows him to "invent the possibility of a conscientious, moderately alienated citizenship." See Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, 1–2.

²⁰ The manner in which this idiosyncratic politics provoked the "men of Athens" gathered to hear his defense against the charges is the focus of [Chapter 5](#).

remains provocative today, and its depiction in the writings of Plato compels us to consider the extent to which philosophy is itself a political activity that requires us to ensure that all our relationships, be they public or private, are animated by the assiduous attempt to speak truth and seek justice.

This is indeed the picture Plato writes into the dialogues of a Socrates whose very life embodies the words he speaks. Plato's written picture is, however, politically subversive precisely because it refuses to adopt the traditional distinction between public and private on the basis of which politics has been practiced for generations. Thucydides already gives voice to the standard Athenian understanding of the proper relationship between the public and the private when, in the *Funeral Oration*, he has Pericles juxtapose the two spheres. The private is a place of permissiveness and tolerance, the public, the place of law, justice, and shame:

We govern our common affairs freely, but in regards to suspicion of one another in our everyday pursuits, we do not get angry at our neighbor if he does whatever he pleases, nor cast a look of reproach, which although not painful, is distressing nonetheless. Although unencumbered in our private associations, we do not transgress the law with respect to public things, above all on account of fear, but are obedient always to those in power and to the laws [*tōn nomōn*], particularly those that are set down for the benefit of those wronged [*tōn adikoumenōn*] and to those unwritten customs that bear an agreed upon shame [*aischunēn*].²¹

To appear in public is to enter into a governed space where rulers coerce, written laws are set down to combat injustice, and customs condition action by means of shame. Politics is a public affair in which human relationships are determined by the complex dynamics of appearing in public. The private, on the other hand, is said to be an unencumbered sphere in which each is left to do what is pleasing.

The logic governing the boundary between public and private articulated here has conditioned the history of political philosophy for millennia. It remains clearly discernible in Arendt's political philosophy, rooted as her thinking is in the strict distinction between the public

²¹ Thucydides, *Historiae* I, II.37.2–3.

and private, the origins of which she traces to the Greek *polis*.²² In this context, she is fond of citing Werner Jaeger, when he writes:

The polis gives each individual his due place in its political cosmos, and thereby gives him, besides his private life, a sort of second life, his *bios politikos*. Now, every citizen belongs to two orders of existence; and there is a sharp distinction in his life between what is his own (*idion*) and what is communal (*koinon*). Man is not only “idiotic,” he is also “politic.”²³

To be political, then, meant for the Greeks to be a certain kind of amphibian. It was to be able to traverse the clear boundary between two worlds: that intimate world of private affairs in which one is permitted to speak and act as one pleases, and that public world of common affairs in which one is expected to say and do things with a regard for custom and law. In ancient Athens, only adult male citizens were capable of such an amphibious existence, and a sign of one’s excellence as a citizen was the ability to know how to speak and act properly in each sphere.²⁴ However, as the passage from the *Apology* makes clear, Socrates renders the boundary between public and private porous in a way that challenges the traditional manner in which the relationship between philosophy and politics has been understood. By insisting that the real fight for justice plays out in private as opposed to public practice, Socrates infuses political concerns into each idiosyncratic relationship he establishes.

²² Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, illustrates the extent to which the public/private distinction is rooted in Ancient Greek thinking. See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 22–78. For a good discussion of how the public/private distinction is parsed throughout the history of Western political philosophy, see Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*.

²³ See Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, I, 111. Jaeger himself traces the origins of this distinction to the second fragment in Heraclitus, which reads in part: “[B]ut although the λόγος is common, the many live as though they had a private understanding.” See Diels, *Die Fragmente Der Vorsokratiker*, 6th, 151. For her part, Arendt cited this passage in Jaeger at least twice, once at a decisive point in *The Human Condition* and once in her essay *What Is Authority?* For the former, see Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 24. For the latter, see Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, 117.

²⁴ As Marina McCoy has pointed out in thoughtful comments on a draft of this chapter, it is important to recall here that the private sphere in Ancient Greece was not a space of permissiveness for all. Women, children, and slaves, each in a different way, were not unencumbered as were their husbands, fathers, and masters. This space of permissiveness was itself predicated on very real submissiveness. By rendering the boundary between public and private porous, however, Socratic politics opens the possibility of bringing the question of justice into the private sphere of the household, even if he is not depicted as putting that question into practice there.

Rendering philosophy political in this way, Socrates subverts the standard practices of Greek politics and the values those practices embodied and legitimated. The subversive nature of Socratic political philosophy comes nowhere more clearly to language than in his encounter with Callicles in the *Gorgias*. In the context of that conversation, Socrates gives voice to the distinctly political nature of his philosophical practice:

I think that with few Athenians, so as not to say the only one, I attempt the political art truly [*epicheirein tēi ōs alēthōs politikēi technēi*] and I alone of those now living do political things [*prattein ta politika*]; for it is not toward [*pros*] gratification that I speak the speeches I speak on each occasion, but toward [*pros to beltiston*] the best, not toward [*pros*] the most pleasant, and I am not willing to do the things you recommend, “those clever subtleties,” I will not have anything to say in the court of justice.²⁵

Socrates is led to make these comments by an attack Callicles levels against the very course of life Socrates has followed. This attack must be heard in two contexts at once, for not only does it occur in the unfolding drama that is the *Gorgias*, a context investigated in some detail in [Chapter 3](#), but it also expresses a critique of the prevailing vision of politics so deeply embedded in the wider political culture of fourth-century Athens. Despite his antipathy toward the law or custom (*nomos*) to which Pericles appeals as bringing “agreed upon shame,” the attack Callicles levels against Socrates in the *Gorgias* is rooted in the same canonical understanding of the proper distinction between public and private we heard from Pericles. The private sphere is inconsequential, whereas the public sphere opens the space for great actions. When Socrates references “those clever subtleties,” he calls our attention back to the moment when Callicles first inserts himself into the discussion of the *Gorgias*. There Callicles draws on Euripides’ *Antiope* to establish a strict distinction between the contemplative life of the philosopher and the practical life of those engaged in politics.²⁶ The life of the philosopher, Callicles insists, is spent “whispering in corners with three or four boys and never giving voice to that which is free [*eleutheron*] and great

²⁵ *Gorgias*, 521d6–e2.

²⁶ *Gorgias*, 486c4–d1.

and opportune.”²⁷ The freedom of which Callicles speaks here is the same freedom of which Pericles speaks in the funeral oration when he insists that the Athenians govern their affairs “freely” (*eleutherōs*).²⁸ If, however, Callicles is to be taken to give voice to the standard Athenian attitude toward politics, it is the attitude more closely aligned with the position Thucydides puts into the mouths of the Athenian envoys to Melos in 415 BCE than it is with the ideals associated with the funeral oration of Pericles in 431–430 BCE. Still, at that time Pericles could say of Athenians, “we love the beautiful with economy and we love wisdom without softness,” and he could praise particularly the laws benefitting those who are wronged (*adikoumenōn*); but after fifteen years of war, when the Athenians sent envoys to Melos to solidify their control over the Aegean Sea, they had become hardened to any talk of beauty, philosophy, or justice.²⁹

The Melian dialogue presents a picture of an Athenian citizenry that, like Callicles, has transformed the talk of justice into a bald appeal to force. In Melos, they insist: “[Let us discuss] the powers from which we each think that we can accomplish [our goals] – as people who know [speak to] people who have seen that in human calculation just things [*dikaia*] are decided from an equal power to compel [*anangkēs*] and that those who have power act, while those who are weak [*oi astheneis*] give way.”³⁰ Callicles himself refers to the “weak” as he begins to transform the meaning of *nomos* from custom to law in order ultimately to show that the laws were created by the weak precisely to counteract the “law of nature” in which “it is just that the better have more than the worse and the more powerful [*dunatōteron*] [have more] than the powerless.”³¹ Callicles here shifts the meaning of justice toward power in order quickly to reduce power (*dunamis*) to force (*kratos*), for he insists

²⁷ *Gorgias*, 485d6–e2.

²⁸ *Historiae* I, II.37.2. Thucydides has Pericles put the Athenian ideal of freedom into eloquent words when he writes: “Now you, imitating them [i.e., those who died for the sake of the city] and judging happiness to be freedom, but freedom to be good courage, do not shrink from the dangers of war” (*ibid.*, II.43.4).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, II.40.1, II.37.3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, V.89. Alfonso Gómez-Lobo suggests that the Athenian envoys “want to exclude all arguments based on questions of justice or, as we would say, based on ethics and international law.” See Gómez-Lobo, “Philosophical Remarks on Thucydides’ Melian Dialogue,” 184.

³¹ *Gorgias*, 483d1–2. For the reference to the “weak,” see *Gorgias*, 483b5.

that the way the just has been discerned in all living things and in all human communities (*poleis*) is “that the stronger [*kreittō*] should rule over and have more than the weaker.”³² In the Melian dialogue, the Athenians anticipate the things Callicles says in the *Gorgias* about the law of nature when they insist:

For with respect to the divine, we think that by opinion and with respect to human things clearly it rules everything by a compelling nature [*hupo phuseōs anankaia*s] where it is strong; and we, indeed, neither positing this law [*nomon*] nor, it being laid down, being the first to use it, but taking it up as it existed and will exist into always, we use it, knowing also that you and others, being in the same power [*dunamei*] as we, would do the same.³³

The Athenians identify the divine with what rules everything by a compelling nature and thus with a “law” that they did not make but rather simply use as all who are stronger naturally would. Although Callicles seems to have been the first to speak of a “law of nature,” the basic idea is already heard in this passage from Thucydides.³⁴ The Athenians, like Callicles, appeal to the force of the stronger as the natural law governing human relationships. And when they refer to *dunamis* or “power,” they already mean force in the sense in which Callicles uses *kratos* or “force” in the *Gorgias*. Thus, Callicles, it seems, is made to give voice to the rather extreme vision of Athenian politics that emerged in the later part of the Peloponnesian War.

SOCRATIC POLITICAL SPEAKING

Socratic politics stands eloquently against the practices of that Athenian politics of force to which Callicles gives such adamant voice. If Callicles

³² *Gorgias*, 483d2–6. For a discussion of the important distinction between power and force, a distinction Callicles implicitly attempts to annihilate here, see Long, “The Daughters of Metis.”

³³ *Historiae I*, 5.105.2–3.

³⁴ Although Alessandra Fussi is probably right to emphasize that the phrase “law of nature” appears here for the first time in Greek literature, the idea itself seems to have been anticipated by Thucydides in the Melian Dialogue. See Fussi, “Callicles’ Examples of *Nomos Tes Phuseos* in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” 119.

and the Athenian ambassadors to Melos appeal to a law of nature that reduces power to brute force, Socrates points to the nature of a law that roots true power in the ability to speak toward the best. If Callicles and the Athenian ambassadors purge public discourse of the concern for justice, Socrates injects the question of justice into even his most private conversations. If they divorce philosophy from politics, relegating it to whispers and corners, he renders politics philosophical, enjoining it to be concerned more with truth than expediency, more with the good than with pleasure. The Socrates depicted in the Platonic dialogues is a strange and powerful political figure who at once challenges the traditional practices of Athenian politics and provokes the individuals he encounters to consider if the course of their lives is oriented toward what is just and beautiful and good.

Something of the enigmatic practice of Socratic politics may be discerned by attending to the two seemingly contradictory passages we have cited from the *Apology* and the *Gorgias*. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates delineates his own practice from those who exploit the public's desire for pleasure in courts of justice, even as he lends determination to his own political practice, which involves putting words in the service of the best. Already in this formulation we hear a core commitment to the power of words to "do political things." This commitment, of course, would have been shared by most political rhetoricians of the time, but what sets the Socratic practice apart from traditional Athenian politics is its insistence that the *true* art of politics requires a very specific way of speaking, one on each occasion oriented toward the best and animated by an attempt to articulate the truth.³⁵ The *Gorgias* passage suggests

³⁵ Although Havelock embraces a hackneyed and dogmatic form of Platonism in order to establish a stark and therefore misleading contrast between Platonism and the sophistic movement, he nevertheless articulates well the manner in which words were understood in fourth- and fifth-century BCE Greece to be capable of political action: "Suffice it to say that for sophistic the term *logos* implies in the first instance a communication between human beings about their joint affairs. . . . The linguistic faculty is acquired by social practice, and reacts in turn as a form of social pressure, and admits of different degrees of proficiency though we all share it. Discourse as a technique and political judgment as an operation of psyche go hand in hand. . . . Political judgment, indeed, is hardly distinguishable from communication. The effectiveness of one is also the effectiveness of the other." Havelock, *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics*, 192–3. Havelock insists concerning this sophistic approach to *logos* that "Platonism collided head on with this whole philosophy at every point" (*ibid.*). Yet even if we grant this perhaps of "Platonism," when we turn our attention to the things Plato wrote, a picture of Socrates emerges in which λόγος is intimately bound up

precisely how the activity of philosophy is political. Socratic philosophy involves an erotic orientation toward wisdom that enjoins us to put to our relationships with others into words informed by a concern for the ideals of justice, beauty, and the good, which, because they are themselves accessible precisely as *ideals*, remain ultimately elusive.³⁶ To characterize politics as the attempt to speak toward the best is to translate this philosophical practice into political terms.

Yet this characterization of Socrates' philosophical and political practice seems to conflict with a passage we encountered in the *Apology*, the only dialogue in which Socrates attempts to use words directly to move a multitude as opposed to an individual. That passage reinforced the traditional dichotomy between the public and private by identifying the political realm with the public sphere and suggesting that the practice of politics involves exposure to the public in a certain way.³⁷ In this regard, Socrates may be heard to draw on the contemporary Athenian understanding of politics as a specific way of speaking before and influencing a multitude. Yet at the end of the passage, when he identifies private practice – a term itself associated in Greek culture as in ours with a certain way of practicing medicine – as the site where the real “fight for justice” must be waged, Socrates undermines the traditional public/private dichotomy insofar as the political question of justice is recognized as being at stake in even the most private of relationships.³⁸ Of course, Socrates himself inhabited the marketplace, a sphere in which the

with social and political practice and is deployed precisely to exert an intense social pressure designed to cultivate in those to whom it is directed conscientious political judgment.

³⁶ In Plutarch we find a deep recognition of the importance of the practice of Socratic philosophy as an erotic orientation toward wisdom. For a more detailed discussion with Mark Shifmann of Plutarch in this regard, listen to Long, Christopher P., “Digital Dialogue 36: Plutarch and Socrates” (http://www.cplong.org/digitaldialogue/digital_dialogue_36_plutarch_and_socrates/).

³⁷ Arendt's account of the term *doxa* highlights the important connection between politics and public appearing: “The word *doxa* means not only opinion but also splendor and fame. As such, it is related to the political realm, which is the public sphere in which everybody can appear and show who he himself is. To assert one's own opinion belonged to being able to show oneself, to be seen and heard by others. To the Greeks this was the one great privilege attached to public life and lacking in the privacy of the household, where one is neither seen nor heard by others.” Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 80. It is worth noting that Arendt points to Socrates as one who refused public office but nevertheless did not retreat to private life, but rather appeared in the public marketplace that trafficked not simply in commerce but in precisely such *doxai* (*ibid.*, 81).

³⁸ In the *Gorgias*, Socrates uses the same terms, ἰδιωτεύειν and δημασιεύειν, in reference to the public and private practice of doctors (514d–e).

traditional dichotomies between public and private have always been blurred; and it is perhaps precisely for this reason that Socrates felt most at home in the *agora*.

These two passages trace the enigmatic contours of the topology of Socratic politics, for in the one we hear Socrates claiming to be the only one (or one of the only ones) among the Athenians to practice “the art of politics truly” even as he refuses to engage in the kind of pandering speech that has characterized politics for generations; while in the other we hear Socrates refusing to participate in the public politics of the Assembly even as he claims to fight for the kind of justice that has long been thought to belong primarily, if not exclusively, to the contexts of such governing bodies. The tension between these two passages uncovers the degree to which the practice of Socratic politics is prior to and ultimately other than the traditional activity of politics that endeavors to seek institutional authority and directly influence public policy.³⁹ Yet these two passages also point to the site of the practice of Socratic political speaking, for in the first passage, Socrates suggests that he endeavors “to speak the speeches I speak *on each occasion*” toward the best, and in the second, he insists that the real fight for justice involves private action. Taken together, these two passages point to the concrete encounters between individuals as the proper site of Socratic politics. Socrates practices politics as philosophy. To discern something of how this works in concrete terms, let us turn our attention to the *Protagoras*, a dialogue that indicates the manner in which Socrates’ concern for an individual animates his engagement with one of the most renowned intellectual figures of his time.⁴⁰ Attention to this dialogue will set us on a path toward a deeper understanding of the practices of Socratic politics, but it will also begin to uncover the dynamics of another politics at work

³⁹ The point here is that the politics Socrates practices is not animated by a concern to seek public authority and directly influence public policy, but rather by a concern to speak truth and do justice in each context in which he finds himself. As the account he himself gives in the *Apology* indicates, Socrates was willing to serve as a member of the Athenian Council as a representative from his *φύλῃ*, or tribe, and he did resist the Thirty when they insisted he and four others deliver Leon of Salamis to be executed (*Apology* 32a–e). Both stories indicate – and they were rhetorically crafted to indicate – that even in these contexts of more institutionalized authority, Socrates spoke and acted on behalf of justice rather than expediency.

⁴⁰ Zuckert sees the *Protagoras* as depicting the moment when Socrates enters onto the stage of the Athenian political scene. Zuckert, *Plato’s Philosophers*, 12.

in the dialogues of Plato. If the proper site of Socratic politics is the concrete encounters between individuals, the proper site of Platonic politics is the concrete encounter, new with every reading, between text and reader, an encounter that has the capacity to transform the wider community in which each reader lives. The topology of Socratic politics points already to the topography of Platonic politics.

2 CRISIS OF COMMUNITY

At what appears to be the very center of the *Protagoras*, a dialogue that is itself situated almost exactly in the middle of the course of Socrates' life, the discussion between Protagoras and Socrates threatens to break down.¹ At first Socrates senses the crisis; then he exacerbates it. When Protagoras resists, for the third time, Socrates' insistence that the conversation proceed by short responses to specific questions, he appeals explicitly to the name he has earned in all of Greece by entering

¹ An earlier version of this chapter was published as Long, "Crisis of Community." To hear that version with a response by Anne-Marie Schultz and the questions and answers that followed our presentation at the 2010 Ancient Philosophy Society conference held at Michigan State, listen to: Long, Christopher P., "Digital Dialogue 32: Crisis of Community" (http://www.cplong.org/digitaldialogue/digital_dialogue_32_crisis_of_community/). Regarding the middle of the dialogue, Gonzalez recognizes it as marking a crisis. See Gonzalez, "Giving Thought to the Good Together: Virtue in Plato's *Protagoras*," 113. He does not, however, recognize further that the crisis in the middle of the dialogue occurs also in the middle of the course of Socrates' life. The *Protagoras* is situated almost exactly in the middle of Socrates' life. Its dramatic date, as generally accepted, is 432 BCE, when Athens was at the height of its political power, just before the start of the Peloponnesian War and the ultimate demise of the Athenian empire. Thus, it takes place 33 years prior to the death of Socrates in 399 BCE, when, we are told, he was 70 years old (*Apology*, 17d). In a certain way, the exact dramatic date of the dialogue is not so much at stake here as is the fact that Socrates was about at mid-life and still young enough to be considering the course of his life. Zuckert suggests that the *Protagoras* marks the emergence of Socrates on the Athenian stage. See Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*, 12. For a good discussion of the general agreement that 432 BCE is the dramatic date of the dialogue and of how to account for the apparent anachronisms in the text that appear if this date is held firm, see John Walsh, "The Dramatic Dates of Plato's *Protagoras* and the *Lesson of Arete*," *The Classical Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1984). For a discussion of the problems of dating the writing of the dialogues and particularly of the problems about dividing the dialogues into early, middle, and late, see Jacob Howland, "Re-Reading Plato: The Problem of Platonic Chronology," *Phoenix* 45, no. 3 (1991). For an important account of the history of Athens, see Mark Henderson Munn, *The School of History: Athens in the Age of Socrates* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

“contests of speech” and refusing to acquiesce to the terms of his opponent.² Socrates reports his sense that Protagoras “was himself not pleased (*ēresen*) with his responses to the things before us and that he might not want (*ethelēsoi*) to engage in dialogue by voluntarily answering . . .”³ In response, Socrates determined that there was no point in his remaining at the gathering. This is the context in which Socrates says:

I’ve got something else to do and wouldn’t be able to hang around while you reeled out long speeches, I’ll be off. The fact is, there’s somewhere I really must be going – it’s a pity for if I heard these things from you as well it would not be unpleasant.⁴

Although we might surmise that Socrates indulges here in polite duplicity as a sort of social graciousness so as not to insult Protagoras, the claim that there is somewhere he must go is reaffirmed at the very end of the dialogue, when Socrates says: “in any case, I said a while back that it was the proper time (*hōra*) for me to go.”⁵ Thus, Socrates’ claim at the

² *Prot.* 335a4–7. The vocabulary, “contests of speech” (*ἀγῶνα λόγων*) and “opponent” (*ἀντιλέγων*), suggest the agonistic register in which Protagoras understands his encounter with Socrates.

³ *Prot.* 335a9–b1. Denyer points out that the indicative in *ἤρεσεν* suggests that Socrates has more direct knowledge of this, whereas the optative in *ἐθελήσοι* suggests that he is less certain about how Protagoras will act in the future. See Nicholas Denyer, ed. *Plato: Protagoras*, Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 136.

⁴ *Prot.* 335c5.

⁵ *Prot.* 362a2–3. Alessandra Fussi insists that Socrates is lying here, that he in fact has all the leisure in the world to pursue conversations whenever, wherever, and with whomever he pleases. See Fussi, “Why Is the *Gorgias* so Bitter?,” 50. Fussi is correct, however, to emphasize the extent to which at the end, “Socrates’ life is still in his hands.” This point reinforces the notion that the entire course of Socrates’ life is at stake in the *Protagoras*. Zuckert too takes Socrates here to be dissembling, suggesting that “at the end we see that he actually had time to sit down immediately and give a blow-by-blow account of his victory over the famous foreigner to a group of his fellow citizens.” See Zuckert, *Plato’s Philosophers*, 218. There Zuckert also takes issue with Vlastos’s attempt to offer an interpretation that does not require supposing that Socrates knowingly lies or endorses a fallacious argument. See Vlastos, *Platonic Studies*, 223n5. Zuckert thinks that Vlastos can only develop such an interpretation of the *Protagoras* by ignoring the action of the dialogue. See Zuckert, *Plato’s Philosophers*, 218n7. She is right to take Vlastos to task for ignoring the action of the dialogue, but the interpretation offered here neither ignores the action of the dialogue nor requires us to take Socrates as a liar. If we assume the meeting with the unnamed friend is the very reason he says he needed to leave, then the very action of the dialogue might be shown to support the claim that Socrates speaks here the truth.

moment of crisis in the middle that he has something else to do is perhaps not as disingenuous as it at first appears.

At the very beginning of the dialogue, we are given a sense of what might have been pressing on Socrates: a meeting with a friend. The dialogue begins this way: “Whence, Socrates, do you appear?”⁶ The question “whence?” itself appears at a crossroads, as one course of life encounters another. As the first word of the dialogue, “*Póthen*,” announces a central theme of the dialogue: the proper course of a life – or as will be heard, of two lives, that of Hippocrates and that of Socrates himself. Here at the beginning, the question is posed to Socrates and voiced by an unnamed friend. As Denyer has suggested, the phrase itself “has something of the air of ‘Where have you been all this time?’” as if the friend has been waiting for Socrates, anticipating his appearance.⁷ This further reinforces the suggestion that Socrates honestly has somewhere to go and is not simply devising an excuse to end his conversation with Protagoras. If this is the case, then Socrates himself seems to be willing to put off his meeting with friends in order to pursue this discussion with Protagoras. The importance of the discussion and the need to continue it animate the very telling of the story to the friends, and we are left to imagine that perhaps after Socrates retells the story of his encounter with Protagoras, he and his friends take up the very

⁶ *Prot.* 309a1. The Greek is: “Πόθεν, ὃ Σωκράτης, φαίνει.” Unlike the *Republic*, which begins with a definitive statement, articulated in the first person, about where Socrates was coming from and what he was doing when he is caught by the slave of Polemarchus, the *Protagoras*, like the *Ion* (Τὸν Ἴωνα χαίρειν. Πόθεν τὰ νῦν ἡμῖν ἐπιδεδήμηκας; ἢ οἴκοθεν ἐξ Ἐφέσου; [530a]) and the *Menexenus* (Εξ ἀγορᾶς ἢ πόθεν Μενέξενος; [234a1]), begins with a question that recognizes and emphasizes the course of Socrates’ life. The question “whence?” itself appears at a crossroads, as one course of life encounters another. A number of dialogues begin with a version of the question: Πόθεν; Whence? Aside from those mentioned, there is also the *Lysis*, which begins with Socrates literally describing his path “straight from the Academy to the Lyceum by the road that skirts the outside of the walls” when Hippothales, seeing him, calls out: “Socrates whither and whence?” (203a–b). This question serves to situate each dialogue along the path of a life, in the moment of an encounter along the way. It reminds us that each encounter has the capacity to shift the course of a life, to move it in one direction rather than another. So too, then, in the *Phaedrus*, where the course of Phaedrus’ life is at stake, we hear Socrates ask: Ὡ φίλε Φαῖδρε, ποῖ δὴ καὶ πόθεν; “My friend Phaedrus, where are you going and where have you been?” (227a1). In each dialogue, precisely such a course of life is at stake, and the new possibilities of relation that are opened by the dialogue itself carry always the possibility of transformation.

⁷ Denyer, ed. *Plato: Protagoras*, 65.

issues left unaddressed at the end of the dialogue: What is it to be good and then, can it be taught?⁸

As performed rather than narrated,⁹ the question with which the dialogue begins captures a moment of encounter as it intrudes on the course of a life. It announces the moment when Socrates appears to his friend as at once long anticipated and yet still as somehow unexpected. The question – *Pothen*; Whence? – frames the entire dialogue as a kind of apology, one in which Socrates attempts to justify his tardiness and legitimize his decision to spend his time with Protagoras at the house of Callias. Thus, if the beginning of the dialogue is read from the perspective of its end, Socrates is shown to have had someplace to go throughout: he has had a friend to meet.

The dialogue interrupts the course of Socrates' life even as it also announces this course as a concern throughout. In the end, Socrates tells Protagoras: "... in your story, Prometheus was pleasing to me more than Epimetheus; for I concern myself with these things because I am consulting him and taking care over the whole of my life."¹⁰ Here the dialogue, which has traditionally and not incorrectly been taken to

⁸ *Prot.*, 361d.

⁹ Leo Strauss has emphasized the significance of the difference between the performed and the narrated dialogues. There are, by his count, twenty-six performed dialogues and nine narrated dialogues; of the narrated, six are narrated by Socrates, three by another named figure, while they are narrated either to a named man (two), a nameless companion (two), or to an indeterminate audience (five). Strauss emphasizes that "The performed dialogue is not encumbered by the innumerable repetitions of 'he said' and 'I said.' In the narrated dialogue on the other hand a participant in the conversation gives an account directly or indirectly to nonparticipants and hence also to us, while in the performed dialogue there is no bridge between the characters of the dialogues and the reader; in a narrated dialogue Socrates may tell us things which he could not tell with propriety to his interlocutors, for instance why he made a certain move in the conversation or what he thought of his interlocutors; he thus can reveal to us some of his secrets." See Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 58. The *Protagoras* is unique insofar as it begins as a performative dialogue only then to be narrated by Socrates himself. Other dialogues have a performative, dramatic beginning that moves into a narrative form, but the narration in each case is undertaken by someone close to Socrates but not Socrates himself. (In the *Phaedo* the narration is by Phaedo talking to Echechrates, in the *Symposium*, by Apollodorus speaking apparently to a "Glaucón," and the *Theatetus* is performed by Euclides reading to Terpsion a written text that itself performs a discussion between Theodorus, Theatetus, and Socrates.) For a good discussion of the narrative dialogues, see Schultz, *Plato's Socrates as Narrator*.

¹⁰ *Prot.* 361d2–4. The Greek for taking care, *προμηθεύμενος*, plays on the name Prometheus. Socrates is already oriented toward the question of the whole of a life in talking to Hippocrates; see 313a6–7. Gonzalez rightly identifies Socrates with Prometheus in the

concern the teaching of virtue, is said to bear on the entire course of Socrates' life. The question concerning human excellence and how to cultivate it in oneself and others is also, however, here shown to bear on the course of the lives of those one encounters. In this case, it concerns specifically the course of the life of Hippocrates, who woke Socrates before dawn and caused him to alter his plans for the day.

THE PROPER TIME

The crisis at the center of the dialogue should then be heard as conditioned by a peculiar temporality that frames the dialogue as a whole. When, at the very end, Protagoras puts off Socrates' invitation to "speak from the beginning"¹¹ in order to have a thorough look together into "what it is to be a virtuous person,"¹² he says: "now, however, its already the proper time (*hōra ēdē*) to turn to something else."¹³ To this, as mentioned, Socrates responds by echoing the appeal to the proper time (*hōra*):

If it seems so to you, it is necessary to do this. In any case, I said a while back that it was the proper time [*hōra*] for me to go. For I only stayed to gratify Callias, because he is so beautiful.¹⁴

dialogue and further articulates well in his title, which is also his conclusion, that the whole of Socrates' life is dedicated to virtues, which itself is nothing other than "Giving Thought to the Good Together." See Gonzalez, "Giving Thought to the Good Together: Virtue in Plato's Protagoras," 143.

¹¹ *Prot.* 361d5.

¹² *Prot.* 361c4–5.

¹³ *Prot.* 361e6.

¹⁴ *Prot.* 362a1–3. There are at least three other dialogues that end with an announcement that it is the proper time, ὥρα, to go: in the *Euthyphro*, Euthyphro himself, unable to follow or indeed even really to hear Socrates' questioning him concerning piety, announces: "I am in a hurry now, it is time (ὥρα) for me to go" (15e). The *Protagoras*, however, is more like the *Apology* insofar as in it Socrates is the one who evokes the ὥρα, the proper time to go. The passage from the *Apology* poignantly articulates what is at stake in the appeal to the ὥρα: "But it is already time (ὥρα) to depart, for me to die, and for you to live; which of us goes to the better is unclear to any except the god" (42a). In both the *Euthyphro* and the *Apology*, the proper time, the ὥρα, is associated with a certain departure; indeed, the proper time is bound up in both cases with the question of death – Euthyphro is off to prosecute his father for murder, leaving Socrates to face his own indictment; whereas in the *Apology*, the time is ripe for Socrates to submit to the judgment of the "men of Athens." For a discussion of the importance of this last formulation, see Diskin Clay and the significance of "Men of Athens" as opposed to "δικασταί." See Diskin Clay, *Platonic Questions: Dialogues with*

The appeal to the proper time at the end not only draws our attention to the crisis in the middle in which Socrates insists that he has obligations elsewhere, but it also returns us to the very beginning of the dialogue, where the friend surmises that Socrates has been hunting the ripe young Alcibiades. Specifically, the friend asks after the “proper time” and in so asking playfully reveals himself as familiar with the erotic ways of Socrates:

But it is clear that you’ve been hunting the blooming youth of Alcibiades [*peri tēn Alkibiadou hōran*]. Indeed, he appeared to me and just the other day I saw the still beautiful man, but man nevertheless, Socrates, for to speak just between us, his beard is already filling-in.¹⁵

The proper time here is bound up with the time of youth when a young man is, to quote the lines of Homer to which Socrates himself appeals, “with beard new grown, which is the most graceful time of young manhood.”¹⁶ The reference here in Homer is to Hermes, who appears to Priam as such a graceful young man, having been sent by Zeus to escort Priam to the Greek encampment to attempt to retrieve from Achilles the body of his son, Hector.

Hermes is the traveling god of the in-between, who frequents the terrestrial sphere, conversing with mortals and traversing the boundary between the divine and the human.¹⁷ He is, as Norman Brown puts it, “the ‘guide’ who presides over all comings-in and goings-out, the ‘ambassador’ who protects men in their dealings with strangers.”¹⁸ To identify Alcibiades with Hermes as Plato implicitly does here is already to emphasize the earthly journey on which Socrates has embarked. In

the Silent Philosopher (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 51.

¹⁵ *Prot.* 309a2–4.

¹⁶ Homer, *Homeri Ilias*, 24.347. The translation is Lattimore’s: Lattimore, *Homer’s Iliad*. Socrates omits the “πρῶτον,” thus making Homer suggest that the most graceful time is when a man has a beard rather than when he first starts to grow one. This point is made by Denyer, *Plato: Protagoras*, 66.

¹⁷ Vernant, *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*, 128ff.

¹⁸ Brown also underscores the notion that Hermes regulates communication with strangers, emphasizing that this characteristic is bound up with Hermes’ status as a divine trickster. See Brown, *Hermes the Thief: The Evolution of a Myth*, 33–4. For a good discussion of the figure of Hermes, particularly as related to the question of the public/private dichotomy, see Thompson, “Reclaiming Hermes.”

the *Protagoras*, this journey is shown to be led by an image of Hermes, Alcibiades, who, as Socrates himself says, “today especially spoke up for me and came to my aid many times.”¹⁹ Alcibiades thus serves as a kind of ambassador who protects Socrates in his dealings with the stranger, Protagoras. Indeed, Alcibiades speaks up for Socrates and comes to his aid at three decisive moments in the course of the conversation when it is in jeopardy of failing *as a dialogue*.²⁰

If, then, the *Protagoras* is framed by the temporality of the proper time, it is introduced as a journey guided by a phantom of Hermes.²¹ This suggests, indeed, an itinerary for a reading of the dialogue in which those moments when Alcibiades speaks up for Socrates are heard to defer his departure and thus to situate him, and us, in the middle of a discussion of excellence with a community of young men intent on wielding power in the city. In pursuing this itinerary, we find ourselves situated in a determinate spacio-temporal terrain the contours of which can be discerned as the proper topology of Socratic politics.²²

The topology of Socratic politics, which is initially marked in the dialogue by the temporality of the *hōra*, the proper time, is here articulated by a discourse erotically oriented to the question of excellence.²³ The proper time thus appears in this dialogue as intimately bound up with the erotic dimension of human existence. The *hōra* marks finite, organic temporality, rooted in the rhythms of a natural life and oriented

¹⁹ *Prot.* 309b5–6. Denyer calls our attention to a comment made by Clement of Alexandria, who writes in his *Protreptic* 4.53.6 that Athenian sculptors used Alcibiades as the model for statues of Hermes. See Denyer, *Plato: Protagoras*, 66. This reinforces the connection between Alcibiades and Hermes, who was himself said to be charismatic. See McCoy, “Protagoras on Human Nature, Wisdom and the Good: The Great Speech and the Hedonism of Plato’s Protagoras.”

²⁰ Each of these moments will be treated in more detail below, but they occur at: 336b, 347b, and 348c.

²¹ For a discussion with Ryan Drake of how Hermes guides us in the *Protagoras*, listen to: Long, Christopher P., “Digital Dialogue 31: Shame and Justice” (http://www.cplong.org/digitaldialogue/digital_dialogue_31_shame_and_justice/).

²² Although a distinction between what Plato writes and what Socrates says is here again established, it cannot be rigidly maintained because the topology of Socratic politics is woven into the topography of Platonic politics.

²³ What begins with a gesture to the erotic pursuit of the proper time of youth ends with an appeal to a departure long deferred by the beauty of a millionaire. Freeman, “Portrait of a Millionaire – Callias Son of Hipponicus.”

by the fertility endemic to erotic relation.²⁴ In the end and from the beginning, the *hōra* gestures to the course of a life erotically animated by a certain way of engaging in philosophical discourse. So long as there remains a possibility for genuine philosophical dialogue, Socrates is willing to defer his departure in the hope that the time might be ripe to advance toward excellence. Thus, at the end of the dialogue, immediately after claiming that the proper time for him to go has past, Socrates justifies his having stayed by appealing to the beauty of Callias: “I only stayed as a special favor to Callias, since he is so beautiful.”²⁵ Socrates, it seems, is genuinely caught in the middle here, between two erotic attachments. The dialogue *says* these attachments are Alcibiades and Callias, but it *shows* Socrates caught between Protagoras – whose beauty, indeed, made Socrates forget about Alcibiades altogether²⁶ – and his unnamed friend.

CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

The crisis of dialogue that appears in the very middle of the *Protagoras* is itself resolved, at least for the moment, by an intervention of those present. The moment Socrates gets up to leave, Callias physically restrains him. Socrates puts it this way:

... and as I was getting up, Callias seized me with his right hand and took hold of my cloak with his left, like this, and said: “We will not let you go, Socrates; if you go, the dialogues [*hoi dialogoi*] will not be the same for us; I ask you to remain for our sake. As for me, not a single thing would please me to hear more than you and Protagoras engaged in dialogue [*dialeghomenōn*]. Please, Socrates, do this favor for all of us.”²⁷

²⁴ Its roots in the natural rhythm of natural life is what might differentiate the *ōpa*, in emphasis at least, from the *καρπός*. Ryan Drake has pointed me to two other places in the *Protagoras* where “*ōpa*” appears in ways that support the notion that the *ōpa* is associated with the rhythms of nature. At 321a, Protagoras speaks of the way Epimetheus equipped the animals to make them comfortable “in the face of Zeus’s seasons.” At 344d, Socrates speaks of a “hard season” that might leave the farmer helpless.

²⁵ *Prot.* 362a; cf., 338b.

²⁶ *Prot.* 309b7–8.

²⁷ *Prot.* 335c7–d5.

The details of this description are striking. They tell of a Socrates physically restrained in the name of dialogue and community. In so telling, however, the details emphasize the embodied relationship not only between Socrates and Callias but also between Socrates and the unnamed friend with whom he speaks as he recounts the story.²⁸ The scene thus not only marks the moment of crisis at the center of the dialogue, but it also poignantly reminds us of the context in which this dialogue is framed. In taking hold physically of his unnamed friend – “like this” – Socrates at once underscores to his friend how difficult it was for him to get away and calls our attention to the dimension of compulsion endemic to each attempt to cultivate a community of dialogue.

Physically constrained, Socrates attempts to clarify his understanding of being with one another in community by insisting on a difference between dialogue and demagoguery: “For it is one thing, I always thought, to be together (*to suneinai*) with another by means of dialogue, and another to engage in demagoguery.”²⁹ The former, Socrates says, is the sort of talking capable of cultivating a genuine community in which words are tested in ways that call the people engaged in dialogue themselves to account. Socrates insists on the importance of testing the person as well as the idea at two points prior to the current crisis. At 331c–d, Socrates says that in dialogue with Protagoras, it is “the real you and the real me I want to test.” Then again at 333c7–9, Socrates insists that although it is “the *logos* itself I want to examine well, yet still it may perhaps happen that there is a thorough examination of me asking questions and of the one answering them.” Here although Socrates fully embraces the idea that he will be examined in the course of the dialogue, he leaves it subtly open as to whether Protagoras will allow himself

²⁸ The details also gesture to a connection between this scene and that which opens the *Republic* in which the slave boy took hold of Socrates’ cloak – this time it is not a “*tribōn*” but a “*imáttion*” – and, in the name of Polemarchus, ordered Socrates to wait. See *Rep.* I, 327b4–5. The importance of the *tribōn* in the present context is that it signals the economic difference between Socrates and Callias, for the *tribōn* was a sign of poverty and perhaps also integrity, so to have Socrates held by his cloak by one of the richest men of Athens is to underscore a power dynamic in which the poor had a certain authority over the rich, the good over the luxurious. For a discussion of the *tribōn* as “the dress of the poor,” see Denyer, *Plato: Protagoras*, 138.

²⁹ *Prot.* 336b2–3.

similarly to be examined.³⁰ Implicit in Socrates' understanding of dialogue here is the recognition that a *logos*, if it is to have political efficacy, cannot simply be divorced from the person articulating it – a recognition the dialogical form of Platonic writing itself reinforces for us readers. Although it is couched in terms of the form in which the conversation will unfold – by short, responsive questions and answers or by long speeches – what ultimately remains to be determined, and what causes Socrates to stand up, is whether or not Protagoras will take ownership of his *logos* in a way that will enable Socrates to test him along with it. Thus dialogue is here contrasted with demagoguery, the sort of talking endemic to the politics practiced in the Assembly. Demagoguery is animated not by a spirit of genuine engagement and discovery but by that of competition, and it seeks not understanding and community but influence by persuasion. The demagogue merely toys with words, deploying ideas without taking ownership of them, while those engaged in dialogue create community with one another by taking responsibility for the words they speak. The difference, then, between dialogue and demagoguery has brought the conversation to crisis, for Socrates has come to the house of Callias not simply to hear what Protagoras can say but to experience the community his words are capable of creating.

The moment Callias defends Protagoras' right to speak however he pleases, Alcibiades breaks into the conversation, speaking up for Socrates for the first of three times. Yet in speaking up for Socrates here, Alcibiades defends an impoverished understanding of dialogue that remains fundamentally agonistic and thus incapable of cultivating the genuine "being-together with one another" Socrates seems to seek. For Alcibiades, like Hermes himself, is keen on competition and formulates his defense of Socrates in agonistic terms.³¹ Socrates, he says, is willing to concede (*parachōrein*) to Protagoras with respect to the giving

³⁰ This openness is marked in two ways, first with the insertion of "perhaps," suggesting that it is not necessary for the testing of an idea to test the person as well. Second, Socrates does not use the second person pronoun to single out Protagoras in the sentence, although doing so would have made the construction parallel to the previous clause with regard to the questioner and answerer.

³¹ *Prot.* 336c1–3. Here Alcibiades is like the Hermes Timothy Gantz tells us appears in the *Prometheus Desmotes*: he is "a proponent of power politics, with no preference for any but the winning side, and contempt for those who believe otherwise." See Gantz, *Early Greek Myth*, 111.

of long speeches, but “I would be amazed if Socrates conceded to any human-being regarding the ability to talk things through (*dialogesthai*) and to know how to give and receive an account (*logon*).”³²

As the group attempts to convince Socrates to put off the proper time to depart, Hippias makes a speech in which he explicitly asks and advises Socrates and Protagoras “to come together into the middle, with us as arbiters bringing you together.”³³ If the proper time marks the temporal dimension of the topology of Socratic politics, Hippias’ formulation articulates its spatial dimension, the site at which the transformative possibilities of dialogue play themselves out. Socratic politics is practiced where two individuals come into direct relation in the middle. Socrates himself suggests the manner in which he understands the dynamics of this coming together into the middle when he, not without hubris, refuses Hippias’ suggestion that a moderator be chosen, insisting, “it would be shameful to pick someone to referee the discussion” for it would presume that the referee is as good or better than Protagoras and Socrates, which he deems impossible.³⁴ What is, however, ultimately at stake for Socrates, it seems, is that the dialogue not be mediated by a third – for it involves the testing of those involved. Thus, Socrates refuses Hippias’ suggestion that a moderator be chosen, insisting that if there is to be a supervisor, “you all in common can preside.”³⁵ This underscores the degree to which the topology of Socratic politics also involves being situated in the middle of a community whose members are enjoined to reflect on the course and direction of dialogue.

SPEAKING ONE’S OWN VOICE AND LISTENING TOGETHER

Socrates and Protagoras are disposed differently to the community in which they find themselves. Charles Griswold has emphasized the

³² *Prot.* 336c1–3.

³³ *Prot.* 337e–338a1. “... to come down into the middle...” translates the Greek: “συμβῆναι ... εἰς τὸ μέσον.” Socrates’ response to this is to describe the effect it had on everyone there – they agreed it was a good idea – and to point out that Callias was not going to let him leave (338b2) in any case. He then proceeds to argue that there is no need for an arbiter because no one there was as good as Protagoras and he.

³⁴ 338b–c.

³⁵ 338e2.

poignantly choreographed scene of Protagoras walking up and down the colonnade in Callias' mansion with a number of people trailing behind him on either side, mesmerized by his spellbinding voice, all "taking great care in no way to be a hindrance to the path of Protagoras."³⁶ For Griswold, the scene indicates the authoritative presence of Protagoras.³⁷ Contrast this with Socrates' response to Hippocrates, who came pounding on his door just before dawn.³⁸ Given the time and urgency of Hippocrates' arrival, Socrates is at first genuinely concerned with his well-being and is relieved when he learns that Hippocrates is there not because something bad has happened but because Protagoras is in town. Socrates enters into direct, personal relation with Hippocrates, taking his enthusiasm over as his own.³⁹

And yet, even as Socrates enters into a community of relation with Hippocrates, he is already beginning to shift the focus of the young man's erotic energies; for the main effect of this conversation is to alert Hippocrates to the dangers of the undertaking he proposes. Introducing a comparison with the decision-making process Hippocrates would have undergone had he been considering which doctor to see, Socrates emphasizes what is at stake: "But here it concerns that which you believe to be greater than your body, namely your soul, that by which you yourself become deserving or worthless by means of all the things that you do either well or badly."⁴⁰ To his credit, Hippocrates has turned to Socrates for advice concerning this most important undertaking, and Socrates responds not by speaking to him in abstractions but by entering into dialogue with him, turning his attention to the condition of his soul and the impact this condition will have on the course of his entire

³⁶ *Prot.* 315b3–4.

³⁷ Griswold, "Relying on Your Own Voice: An Unsettled Rivalry of Moral Ideals in Plato's *Protagoras*," 292. He infers from this that "Protagoras speaks without looking into the eyes of his students, declaims without questioning, and voices his views without demanding that his students hold him accountable for them through questioning."

³⁸ *Prot.* 310a7ff.

³⁹ Further, as the conversation progresses, Socrates quickly identifies himself with Hippocrates, repeating Hippocrates' expression of his own enthusiasm to learn from Protagoras by imagining that when "we" go to talk to Protagoras, "we" will be ready to spend "our" money for "your tuition – our own money if it's enough to persuade him with, and if not, we'll lavish upon him the things of our families too." See *Prot.* 311d1–4; compare what Hippocrates says at 310e1–3.

⁴⁰ *Prot.* 313a6–9. "Deserving" translates *χρηστοῦ*, and "worthless," *πονηροῦ*.

life. But most decisively for the attempt to delineate the topology of Socratic politics, Socrates *adjusts his plans for the day, recognizing that now is the proper time to go along with Hippocrates and to seek together precisely how the young man will be affected if he enters into a community of association with Protagoras.*⁴¹

The last comment Hippocrates explicitly makes in the dialogue suggests that Socrates' attempt to turn him toward the question of the care of the soul has not been in vain. He asks: "But by what means, Socrates, is the soul nourished?" To which Socrates responds, "By means of learning, of course."⁴² For Socrates, the community of association into which Hippocrates wants to enter must be a genuine community of learning if it is to be capable of nourishing his soul. To recognize this is to begin to understand the true stakes of the crisis that emerges in the middle of the dialogue; for the central question of the *Protagoras* is not so much can excellence be taught, but how will an association with Protagoras affect the course of Hippocrates' life?⁴³ Socrates, of course, puts it in erotic terms: "Hippocrates here happens to long for intercourse with you; he says therefore that it would be pleasant to learn what will result for him if he associates with you. This is the extent of what we want to say."⁴⁴ Socrates too is animated

⁴¹ The central question of the dialogue is not so much "can excellence be taught?" as it is "what is the nature of the community of learning into which this young man will enter?" and "how will it affect his soul?" This is underscored above with the formulation "enter into a community of association," which is designed to translate the various iterations of the verbs συγγινέσθαι, to be with, to enter into communication or association with, and σύνειμι, to be with, to live with, to associate with, to follow..., in those passages in which Socrates articulates what animates his desire to talk to Protagoras (316b8ff; 318a1ff). These terms, of course, are all related to συνουσία – social intercourse, society, conversation, community – and the sort of community of communication in which Socrates practices politics.

⁴² *Prot.* 313c8–9. Griswold points out that this is Hippocrates' "last recorded utterance." See Griswold, "Relying on Your Own Voice: An Unsettled Rivalry of Moral Ideals in Plato's *Protagoras*," 296.

⁴³ Zuckert recognizes a concern for Hippocrates as a central focus of the dialogue when she insists, "Socrates had achieved the most immediate goal of his visit; he had discredited the sophist sufficiently in the eyes of his young friend to preserve his soul from possible corruption." See Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*, 228.

⁴⁴ *Prot.* 318a2–4. The first line translates the Greek: "Ἰπποκράτης γὰρ ὅδε τυχάνει ἐν ἐπιθυμίᾳ ὦν τῆς σῆς συνουσίας." Denyer draws our attention to the sexual connotations of both ἐπιθυμία – sexual desire, lust – and συνουσία – sexual intercourse. The translation above plays on the double meaning of "intercourse" in English, which echoes well that heard in the Greek συνουσία.

throughout by this question, which he himself suggests concerns not merely the course of the life and soul of his friend Hippocrates but also the entire course of his own life.⁴⁵ Thus, the crisis that emerges in the middle of the dialogue is not just about the manner in which the conversation between Socrates and Protagoras will proceed, but more significantly, it concerns the precise manner in which Protagoras shows himself capable or incapable of cultivating a community of learning that can, to use Protagoras' own words, "benefit someone of us by leading them out into excellence."⁴⁶ Socrates threatens to dissolve the community when he begins to sense that Protagoras is incapable of engaging in the kind of dialogue that nourishes the soul by cultivating a community of learning oriented toward the question of the good.

The possibility of a dialogue that would cultivate such a transformative community of learning seems to reopen when the interlocutors rally to convince Socrates to remain and an agreement is struck in which Socrates will submit to however many questions Protagoras would like to ask if, in turn, Protagoras will respond to Socrates' questions by keeping his answers brief and sticking to the questions. This agreement saves the community of young men gathered at Callias' for the moment, but it addresses neither the underlying concern as to what ultimately animates and conditions their being together nor the larger concern of the dialogue as to what sort of community of learning Hippocrates would enter should he associate with Protagoras. Socrates, it seems, was willing to dissolve the present association if it proved incapable of speaking in a manner that set the individuals involved on a path toward being good.

Once the agreement is affirmed by all, however, the difference between the community Socrates would like to cultivate and that with which Protagoras seems to feel most comfortable is made clear when Protagoras claims that "the greatest part of being an educated man is to be clever (*deimon*) concerning poetry."⁴⁷ True to his agreement, Socrates responds with cleverness to Protagoras' question concerning the poetry of Simonides. Once his display is complete, however, Socrates

⁴⁵ See *Prot.* 361d3–4.

⁴⁶ *Prot.* 328a6–b1.

⁴⁷ *Prot.* 338e6–339a1.

is empowered to reject Protagoras' vision of education by Alcibiades, who here speaks up for Socrates a second time, this time coming genuinely to his aid by silencing Hippias' suggestion that he too offer an account.⁴⁸

In silencing Hippias, Alcibiades allows Socrates to turn the course of the discussion away from poetry and back to the question of dialogue. This turn marks not only a shift in the course of the dialogue but also a powerful critique of the vision of the educated person Protagoras seems to advocate. The problem with orienting education toward the clever interpretation of poetry is, for Socrates, that it relies too heavily on the voice of another and fails to cultivate an ability to speak in one's own voice.⁴⁹ In juxtaposing those "uneducated and vulgar"⁵⁰ people who rely on poetry for entertainment, with those "beautiful and good"⁵¹ people who have been educated, Socrates invokes the question of "voice." The former are unable to speak in their own voice in cultivating a community of association with one another, relying instead on the voices of poets. Those who have been educated, however, "because they are sufficient themselves with themselves, are able to enter into community without that sort of silly talk and childish play, but through

⁴⁸ *Prot.* 347a–b.

⁴⁹ Ironically, Socrates' own interpretation of Simonides shows this not to be the case. His interpretation is idiosyncratic and philosophically powerful precisely because he relies so much on his own voice. McCoy rightly insists on the philosophical and rhetorical importance of the poem against those who argue either that it is a sort of playful interlude, like Taylor, Shorey, and Guthrie, and those who argue that it is an attempt to assert the inferiority of poetry, like Friedländer and Goldberg. For the specific citations for each position, see McCoy, "Socrates on Simonides: The Use of Poetry in Socratic and Platonic Rhetoric," 365.

⁵⁰ *Prot.* 347c3–5. The terms Socrates uses are significant. He suggests that discussions of poetry are like the parties thrown by "τῶν φαύλων καὶ ἀγοραίων," those who are "uneducated and vulgar." Yet the connotations of these terms are cutting. The first speaks directly to Protagoras' claim that the clever interpretation of poetry was a sign of education (338e7–339a1), for one who is φαύλος is trifling and unsophisticated. The second term, ἀγοραίων, connotes the hucksters, traffickers, and retailers found in the *agora*, and further, it suggests those forensic speakers in the Assembly. For the connotations of these terms, see Liddell and Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*. Socrates levels here a very strong and unambiguous critique of the sort of activities those associated with Protagoras seem to practice.

⁵¹ See *Prot.* 347c3–348a8. Socrates here uses the vocabulary of "καλοὶ καγαθοὶ" and "πεπαιδευμένοι εἰσὶν" (347d2) to draw attention at once to the nobility of those who are educated and to implicitly draw attention back to Protagoras' claim that to be an "educated man" (ἀνδρὶ παιδείας), one needs to be clever at poetry (338e7).

their own voice, speaking and listening in orderly turn....”⁵² For Socrates, the sign of an educated person is the capacity to speak in one’s own voice and to listen in good order. These are the excellences capable of cultivating a genuine community of education.⁵³

Socrates then goes on to turn his attention explicitly to “this community here,” insisting that the same thing applies, for they should not rely on an outside voice “who can’t be asked about the things they say,” but rather, they should “set aside the poets and make speeches with one another through our own (voices), attempting ourselves with ourselves to apprehend the truth.”⁵⁴ The shift from “they” to “we ourselves” is decisive, for it underscores precisely what is at stake for Socrates: the community of education that has emerged between them and, by extension, the community of learning Hippocrates can expect to enter should he join Protagoras. For Socrates, a community of learning is marked by a certain *poiēsis*, not that of the poets, but that of educated people engaged in dialogue with one another, relying on their own voices in an attempt to apprehend the truth. This sort of poetics is, then, an essaying that involves speaking and listening in turn; it is deeply dialogical, self-reliant, and communal. Indeed, it involves a testing not only of ideas but also of each individual member of the community of education it seeks to establish.⁵⁵

The crisis in the middle of the dialogue here takes on deeper significance, for Socrates is concerned that Protagoras is unable to engage in the sort of dialogical poetics capable of creating the sort of educational community from which a young man like Hippocrates might benefit. Not only has Protagoras failed to take adequate ownership of the things he says, but he seems incapable of being present to Socrates or to the question of education they are together pursuing in a way that demonstrates an ability to speak and listen in orderly turn. Yet, where the voice of Protagoras falters, perhaps the voice of Plato can be heard; for as Protagoras is shown to be incapable of dialogical poetics, we are invited

⁵² *Prot.* 347d5–e1.

⁵³ For a discussion of these issues with Marina McCoy, see Long, “Digital Dialogue 06: Attentive Listening” (http://www.cplong.org/digitaldialogue/digital_dialogue_06_attentive_listening/).

⁵⁴ *Prot.* 348a4–6. The Greek for “make speeches” here is “τοὺς λόγους ποιῆσθαι.”

⁵⁵ This, indeed, is what is at stake when Socrates insists, at 333c–d, that it is not only the λόγος but they themselves who are tested in questioning the λόγος.

to discern what habits of response might be cultivated in order to create an educated community oriented toward ideals of excellence. In depicting Socrates' failure to establish such a community with Protagoras, the written dialogue speaks in a discernible voice of its own, enjoining us to reflect on the relational dynamics endemic to an educated life.

JUSTICE AND A SENSE OF SHAME

The wrenching critique of his conception of education seems to have been disconcerting to Protagoras, for Socrates reports that he would not give a straight response as to how to proceed. Alcibiades enters here for the final time, leaning over to Callias to ask if he thinks Protagoras is doing beautifully. Alcibiades himself insists that he is not.⁵⁶ Socrates reports that he sensed that Protagoras was embarrassed by Alcibiades' comments.

Alcibiades here again speaks in the spirit of Hermes, who on Protagoras' own earlier account was said to have brought shame (*aidō*) and justice (*dikē*) to human beings.⁵⁷ In making Protagoras feel ashamed, Alcibiades again comes to the aid of Socrates as he attempts to leverage Protagoras' existing concern for how he appears to others in order to cultivate a genuine community of learning between them.⁵⁸ The sense of shame Hermes brings to humans is carried along with justice, for justice first becomes possible when people have internalized their concern for others in such a way that they recognize it as bearing on themselves.⁵⁹ If Hermes brings justice together with shame, Socrates, with the help of Alcibiades, deploys shame to make Protagoras feel the truth about himself, that his concern for the opinions of others is not

⁵⁶ *Prot.* 348b4–6.

⁵⁷ *Prot.* 322c2–3.

⁵⁸ Marina McCoy translates the term as “shame” and emphasizes the social and political import of the term insofar as it points to “a concern for the opinions of others.” See McCoy, “Protagoras on Human Nature, Wisdom and the Good: The Great Speech and the Hedonism of Plato’s Protagoras,” 23n4.

⁵⁹ That Plato uses the term “*αἰδῶ*” here is both significant and appropriate insofar as the term is not only more archaic and fitting for the religious context in which it appears, but it also carries positive connotations of awe and respect that condition the possibility of justice. For a discussion of the difference between *αἰδώς* and *αἰσχύνῃ*, see Tarnopolsky, *Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants*, 11–13.

rooted in a genuine concern for them and his community with them but for himself and his own “reputation among the Greeks.”⁶⁰

The crisis in the middle of the dialogue concerned precisely the question as to how Protagoras will speak, will he respond to Socrates or will he, as Callias advocated, “speak however he wants.”⁶¹ Alcibiades spoke up there as he does here, to insist on dialogue. If Alcibiades’ own understanding of dialogue was originally bound up too much with a spirit of agonism, here, the agonistic spirit is made to do therapeutic work, for Protagoras is forced to feel ashamed by the manner in which he has comported himself in the discussion. Socrates, however, responds to this sense of shame in the face of others with a sympathetic gesture of friendship that, for a brief period, opens again the possibility that they might engage one another in a genuine way, making words together in their own voices in an attempt to articulate the truth.

The gesture of friendship involves an appeal to Homer, for Socrates says:

Protagoras, you ought not think that I am talking things through [*dialegesthai*] with you for any other reason than because I want to thoroughly investigate each of the things about which I myself am at a loss. I think Homer was exactly right when he said: “If two go together, one might notice first . . .”⁶²

In Homer, Diomedes is made to say this line as he calls for a partner to go on a dangerous nighttime raid of the Trojan encampment.⁶³ Ultimately, it is Odysseus who volunteers to join Diomedes. By invoking the community of friendship between Diomedes and Odysseus, Socrates implicitly identifies Protagoras with the heroic Odysseus in a gesture of friendship designed to move him from a sense of shame to a common concern for justice rooted in the collaborative attempt to speak the truth. Thus, Socrates insists that he is the same as Diomedes, looking for someone with whom to search:

that is why I am talking things through [*dialegomai*] with you more pleasantly than with anyone else, for I think that you are likely to be

⁶⁰ *Prot.* 335a7.

⁶¹ *Prot.* 335b5.

⁶² *Prot.* 348c5–d1.

⁶³ *Iliad*, 10.224.

the best at investigating concerning the things a decent person should investigate, and especially concerning excellence.⁶⁴

This comment draws us at once back to two points in the dialogue. First, the appeal to pleasure draws us to the point of crisis in the middle of the dialogue when Socrates suggests that although it would “not be unpleasant” to hear Protagoras reel off long speeches, he really had some place to which he must be going.⁶⁵ That, however, turned out not to be a fitting time to leave, for the community came together to agree how to proceed by talking things through together. Second, the suggestion that Protagoras is likely to be the best at investigating returns us to that earlier passage in which Socrates originally attempts to turn Protagoras toward dialogue by praising him for embodying certain excellences: “Protagoras here is able to speak long, beautiful speeches, as these things [we’ve heard] show, but he is also able to give short answers when questioned, and, when asking questions, he is able to wait and take care to understand the response.”⁶⁶ Socrates’ praise for Protagoras there has here turned out to have been more hopeful of who Protagoras might prove himself to be than descriptive of who he has shown himself to be. Indeed, this ability to respond to the things asked and to remain and listen to the response is precisely what Socrates has been testing; for he recognizes that if Hippocrates is to enter a community of education capable of nourishing his soul, it will need to be one that embodies the excellences of dialogue. Thus, although the gesture of friendship heard in the appeal to Diomedes and Odysseus is designed to lend Protagoras the courage to continue, it also implicitly suggests the excellences required of a community of education that is able to pursue the question of excellence itself.

Socrates attempts to establish such a community with Protagoras, for he hopes to have found someone capable of speaking in his own voice by responding and listening together in pursuit of excellence. And although the conversation turns then to bravery and pleasure, it never grows into a genuine community of dialogue. Yet this does not mean that the central question of the *Protagoras* ends in *aporia*; for although the discussion of the unity and nature of excellence and of the possibility

⁶⁴ *Prot.* 348d6–e2.

⁶⁵ *Prot.* 335c5.

⁶⁶ *Prot.* 329b1–4.

that it might be taught has indeed left them at a loss, someone seems to have learned from Socrates' failure to establish a community of dialogue in the dialogue. In the end, *Hippocrates* seems to have left with Socrates. Indeed, the dialogue concludes with an enigmatic sentence that at once returns us to its beginning and suggests something of its success: "Having said and heard these things, we left."⁶⁷ If Socrates fails to establish a community of dialogue with Protagoras, he seems to have succeeded in teaching Hippocrates something about excellence.⁶⁸ For the final word, "*apēimen*," articulated in the first person plural, suggests that Hippocrates left with Socrates having learned that the soul is nourished in a community of dialogue with others committed to talking things through together, each speaking in one's own voice and responding in ways that cultivate excellence.

Thus, the dialogue itself demonstrates the contours of the topology of Socratic politics, a space of appearing determined as much by a certain time as by a situated place. The temporal dimension of this topology has been heard in the appeal to the proper time, to the *hōra* that articulates the rhythmic unfolding endemic to the course of life. Indeed, Socratic politics is itself always rooted in the *hōra*; for it is always concerned with the course of the life of an individual and the proper time in which it might be turned toward the question of the good. This turning however,

⁶⁷ The Greek is "ταῦτ' εἰπόντες καὶ ἀκούσαντες ἀπῆμεν" (*Prot.* 362a3). The formulation "εἰπόντες καὶ ἀκούσαντες" echoes the words Socrates used with his friend at the start, words that elicited the request for the account itself. Although Denyer is right to insist that they do not carry with them the "intellectual refinements Plato associates with *διαλέγεσθαι*," nevertheless, they point to the excellences of dialogue Socrates has tried to embody with Protagoras: the capacities to speak in one's own voice and to listen attentively to the responses of others rooted in a concern for the lives of those with whom one is engaged. See Denyer, *Plato: Protagoras*, 204.

⁶⁸ Nussbaum suggests otherwise: "At the end, we do not know whether Hippocrates will choose to make progress with Socrates or to muddle along with Protagoras – or whether he will reject the choice philosophically, by arguing that the alternatives are badly set up, or whether he will reject the choice unphilosophically, by going back to his accustomed thoughts and ways. The argument does not coerce him." See Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 120. And yet, the number and person of the verb "*ἀπῆμεν*" at the end hints at the possibility that the dialogue is more conclusive and Socrates is more successful than Nussbaum recognizes. Zuckert agrees that Socrates is successful with Hippocrates, although she unfairly misrepresents Nussbaum as making a claim in the passage just cited about Hippocrates' immediate decision to stay or leave with Socrates as opposed to the claim she in fact makes, which is only that we don't know what Hippocrates *ultimately* chooses. See Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*, 228n22. Still, the text provides evidence that Hippocrates was convinced but not coerced by Socrates.

is made possible by the cultivation of a community of dialogue in which those involved respond to one another, relying on their own voices in an attempt to articulate the truth. This is the site of Socratic politics, and the place to which Hermes has led us. Yet this place, haunted by Hermes himself, is marked as a kind of threshold in which contrasting life courses often come into decisive conflict. This too is characteristic of the topology of Socratic politics, which plays itself out nowhere more profoundly than in Socrates' encounters with Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles in the *Gorgias*, a dialogue to which we now turn.

3 ATTEMPTING THE POLITICAL ART

In a burst of thumotic energy that marks a moment of truth at the center of Plato's *Gorgias*, Callicles discloses the transformative power of the practice of Socratic philosophy. The words of Socrates move him to it; for in his responses to Polus, Socrates had articulated a radical understanding of human life in which "an unjust deed must not be hidden, but rather brought out into the open in order that one might give justice and become healthy."¹ This provoked Callicles to ask Chaerephon if Socrates is serious or just playing around. And when Chaerephon invites Callicles to ask Socrates himself, Callicles puts words to an unsettling truth: "... if you are serious, and if the things you say happen to be true (*alēthē*), would not our life as human-beings be turned upside down (*anatetrammenos*) and would we not, as it seems, be doing all things opposite to what it is necessary to do?"² Callicles here recognizes that the things Socrates says, *if true*, have the power to transform our common life as human beings by requiring us to act differently.³ And even if throughout the dialogue Callicles shows himself to be incapable of putting words to things in ways that bring justice into the open, here,

¹ Plato, *Platonis Opera*, 1903, vol. III, 480c3–5. An earlier version of this chapter was published as Long, "Attempting the Political Art."

² *Gorgias*, 481c1–4.

³ Irwin is certainly correct to recognize here that "Callicles realizes the importance of Socrates' claims." However, he goes on to emphasize only one side of the important truth to which Callicles gives voice: "Probably Callicles means that Socrates' conclusions show that people's lives *are* upside down . . . , not that his conclusions *will* turn their lives upside down" See Irwin, *Plato Gorgias*, 169. Yet it is likely that the passage implies that the truth of the things Socrates says is capable *both* of showing that people's lives *are* upside down *and* of turning those upside-down lives right side up again by orienting them toward the question of justice. There are diagnostic and therapeutic dimensions to the truths Socrates speaks.

provoked by Socrates, Callicles is moved to speak a truth that uncovers the political nature of Socratic philosophy.

Although Callicles unwittingly articulates the deep political implications of the things Socrates says, he goes on to dismiss the practice of Socratic philosophy as “ridiculous, unmanly and something that deserves a beating.”⁴ In language borrowed from Euripides’ *Antiope*, Callicles urges Socrates to “‘practice the beautiful music of affairs (*pragmatōn*)’ and practice such that ‘you will seem sensible and leave these clever subtleties to others.’”⁵ Callicles attempts to delineate a strict distinction between a philosophical life spent “whispering (*psithrizonata*) in corners” and a political life spent “giving voice (*phthegxasthai*) to that which is free and great and opportune.”⁶ Callicles articulates these two ways of life in terms of different ways of speaking: the philosopher “whispers,” the politician “gives voice.” The Greek “*phthegxasthai*,” to give voice, points to the permeable boundary between the uttering of mere sounds and the sort of voicing capable of carrying meaning – it is situated at the border between the utterances of human and nonhuman animals.⁷ Ultimately, Socrates articulates his own political practice as a certain way of speaking, *legein*. This is what he says:

I think that with few Athenians, so as not to say the only one, I attempt the political art truly [*epixheirein tē ōs alēthōs politikē technē*] and I alone of those now living do political things [*prattein ta politika*]; for it is not toward [*pros*] gratification that I speak the speeches I speak on each occasion, but toward [*pros to beltiston*] the best, not toward [*pros*] the most pleasant, and I am not willing to

⁴ *Gorgias*, 485c1–2.

⁵ *Gorgias*, 486c4–6. In the *Antiope* Euripides is said to have depicted two brothers, Zethus, a herdsman, and Amphion, a musician, engaged in a discussion of their two ways of life. According to Dodds, Euripides used this as an opportunity to extend the question to a general comparison between the practical and the contemplative life. See Dodds, E. R., *Plato Gorgias*, 275–6. Pickard-Cambridge offers a reconstruction of the plot in which Zethus berates his brother, Amphion, for being useless and effeminate as Amphion defends the pursuit of music and philosophy. The discussion seems to have concluded with Amphion acquiescing to go hunting with Zethus. See Pickard-Cambridge, “Tragedy,” 107–8. For another reconstruction of the plot and specifically of the section Callicles seems to draw upon, see Wecklein, “Die Antiope Des Euripides,” 58–62.

⁶ *Gorgias*, 485d9–e2.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of how the boundary between human and nonhuman voicing is blurred in ancient Greek thinking, see Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, 72–115.

do the things you recommend, “these clever subtleties [*ta kompsa tauta*],” I will not have anything to say in the court of justice.⁸

The words Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates here eloquently articulate the political nature of the practice of Socratic philosophy. But if we attend *both* to what Socrates says to Callicles in this dialogical context *and* to how Plato has him say it, we will learn not only that the political practice of Socratic philosophy involves a certain way of speaking but also that Platonic writing itself performs a certain kind of politics. If discerning the practice of Socratic politics requires attending carefully to the ways Socrates speaks “toward the best,” discerning the poetics of Platonic politics requires an ability to hear how the things he has his characters say in the dialogue are themselves crafted to turn the attuned reader “toward the best.” Listening thus in a double register not only to what Socrates says to Callicles in this dramatic context but also to how Plato has him say it will uncover the complex and intimate interconnection between the politics of Platonic writing and that of Socratic speaking. To anticipate: Platonic writing tries to do with us what Socratic saying tries to do with those he encounters. The passage in which Socrates is made to articulate the nature of his political practice speaks thus on two levels. On what might be called the apophantic level, the written text *shows* the philosophical life to be integrated with the political life; on the dialogical level, the things Socrates *says* to Callicles challenge the traditional manner in which Athenian politics is practiced. An apophantic and dialogical double reading of this passage opens the possibility of a double reading of the *Gorgias* as at once depicting the practice of Socratic politics and performing the politics of Platonic writing.

DOING THINGS WITH WORDS

In one sense, it is impossible to maintain a strict distinction between what Socrates says and how Plato has him say it, for the Socrates we encounter in the Platonic dialogues is, as Plato himself puts it, a Socrates

⁸ *Gorgias*, 521d6–e2.

“become beautiful and new.”⁹ Yet in the passage under consideration, there are three repetitions that suggest the manner in which Platonic writing attempts to turn the reader’s attention toward the question of the good and heighten the reader’s awareness of the relationship between the way things are said and a concern for the best. The first and perhaps most striking instance of repetition is heard in the polyptoton of the Greek word for speaking itself, *legein*, when Socrates says “I speak the speeches I speak on each occasion” – “. . . *legōn tous logous hous legō hekastote*.” The trope points to another polyptoton toward the very beginning of the *Gorgias*, in which Polus responds to Chaerephon’s questions concerning who Gorgias is by launching into a display of words in which he repeats iterations of the Greek word for experience, “*empeiria*”: “Many are the arts among human-beings, Chaerephon, that have been discovered experientially from experience, for experience makes the course of life pass along the path of art, and inexperience along the path of luck.”¹⁰ In speaking of the art of which Gorgias partakes, Polus shows himself to have a certain kind of rhetorical knack, for he has the hang of how to play with sounds in appealing ways. Thus, Plato’s decision to put such a rhetorical “jingle” into the mouth of Socrates as he articulates his political art may be taken as an attempt to highlight the difference between how Socrates attempts to do political things with words and how political speech is so often designed to gratify an audience.

Indeed, the practice of Socratic politics is characterized as a way of speaking oriented toward the best as opposed to the merely pleasant. This too is emphasized in writing by the appearance of a second trope of repetition as Socrates is made to speak the preposition “*pros*,” or “toward,” three times. Socrates insists that he speaks “not toward

⁹ Plato and Burnet, *Platonis Opera*, vol. V, 314c4. 314c4–5. There are, obviously, other sources on which to draw for a picture of the historical Socrates. But that endeavor, undertaken by many able scholars, is beside the point made here, which remains concerned exclusively with the difference between Plato the philosopher-dramatist and the figure of Socrates who appears in Plato’s philosophical dialogues. For a compelling recent attempt to discern the historical circumstances around the trial and execution of the historical Socrates, see Brickhouse and Smith, *The Trial and Execution of Socrates: Sources and Controversies*.

¹⁰ *Gorgias*, 448c4–7. The polyptoton can be heard in the following: “πολλὰ τέχνη ἐν ἀνθρώποις εἰσὶν ἐκ τῶν ἐμπειρῶν.” It should be noted that the historical Gorgias was widely known for tropes of repetition – antithesis, alliteration, and polyptaton, for example. See Consigny, *Gorgias*, 156–7.

gratification . . . but toward the best, not toward the most pleasant.”¹¹ As Dodds points out, this is an “*a b a* construction.”¹² The anaphora gestures to the erotic dimension of political speaking and emphasizes the importance of that toward which one’s speech is directed. It thus points back to Socrates’ response to that passage with which we began, when Callicles reinserted himself into the middle of the dialogue. There, Socrates suggests that he and Callicles share a common experience, for “we are two lovers, each in love with two things.”¹³ The distinction between the things they each love, in fact, parses along the line between what is most pleasant and what is best that is established by the repetition of the “*pros*” in the passage under consideration. Socrates is in love with Alcibiades and philosophy, Callicles with Demos, the son of Pylilampes, and the Athenian demos.¹⁴ If Socrates’ two beloveds pull him often in opposite directions, the one toward pleasure, the other toward the best, Callicles is pulled by both of those he loves toward gratification and the maximization of pleasure. If the words Callicles speaks in speaking to Socrates bespeak his erotic attraction toward what is most pleasant, the words Plato writes and the ways they are written call attention to the political implications of allowing our words to be animated by an erotic attraction toward gratification.

The third repetition Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates here is the reiteration of words Callicles had spoken earlier as he quoted from a passage in Euripides’ *Antiope* in which Zethus enjoins his brother Amphion to stop refuting and “work at the sweet music of practical affairs, and work at it where you will gain a reputation for intelligence. Leave these clever subtleties (*ta kompsa tauta*) to others”¹⁵ Thus, Plato makes Socrates refuse Callicles’ advice to give up “these clever subtleties” by repeating the words themselves. *This* refusal *in those* words invites us to consider the degree to which Socrates’ own political practice subverts the traditional way of understanding the distinction

¹¹ *Gorgias*, 521d8–e1.

¹² Dodds, E. R., *Plato Gorgias*, 369.

¹³ *Gorgias*, 481d3.

¹⁴ Demos, the son of Pylilampes, was called “beautiful” by Aristophanes and “stupid” by Eupolis. See Nails, *The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics*, 124. This, of course, does not speak well of Callicles’ erotic judgment, if judgment there be in such cases.

¹⁵ *Gorgias*, 486c4–6.

between the philosophical and the political life as separate and opposed. Taken together, these three instances of written tropes of rhetorical repetition point us to a politics capable of doing things with words when they are rooted in and directed toward an erotic concern for the best. The repetitions themselves require us, as readers, to consider the extent to which philosophy, be it spoken or written, cannot be divorced from politics; for in drawing our attention to the relationship between the words we articulate and the question of the best, the words written by Plato invite us to reflect upon the manner in which we use words to do things in our lives with one another.

But Platonic writing derives its real political power from the manner in which it depicts the figure of Socrates putting politics into practice in a specific way. Let us attend, then, to what Socrates says his political practice involves in the passage we have been considering. It begins in a quintessentially Socratic manner by presenting a most serious point in playful language. “I think that with few Athenians, so as not to say the only one, I attempt the political art truly and I alone of those now living do political things. . . .”¹⁶ As a personal supposition rather than a simple assertion, the arrogance of the claim is tempered even as its effect as a critique of Athenian politics is heightened. Socrates embraces the practice of politics here in a way that superficially seems to contradict a statement he had made earlier to Polus in which he claimed, “I am not of the politicians.”¹⁷ Yet here, a different sort of politics comes to language; for its way of doing is assaying – this is the deep significance of the verb “*epicheirein*” – to attempt, or more literally, to try one’s hand at something.¹⁸ And he goes on to lend determination to what it means to “attempt the political art truly” when he suggests that it involves a way of speaking oriented not toward gratification but toward the best.

What is thus heard in this passage is an implicit critique of a certain way of political speaking, a recognition that the doing of political things

¹⁶ *Gorgias*, 521d6–8.

¹⁷ *Gorgias*, 473e6.

¹⁸ Irwin is right to emphasize this dimension of Socrates’ claim: “Socrates does not say that he *has* this craft, but that he ‘undertakes’ (or ‘attempts’, *epicheirein*) it, looking for its principles; and so this remark need not conflict with his previous disavowal of knowledge.” See Irwin, *Plato Gorgias*, 240. Roochnik too recognizes the importance of the difference between attempting and possessing a τέχνη. See Roochnik, “Socrates’ Rhetorical Attack on Rhetoric,” 91.

involves a specific ability to do things with words. Socrates lends determination to the nature of this ability by calling it a “*politikē technē*.”¹⁹ Yet precisely what Socrates means by emphasizing that his political ability is itself a *technē* can only be discerned by attending to the manner in which he appeals to “*technē*” in the course of the dialogue, where, as will be heard, it names a practice that is held to account on “each occasion” by an erotic relationship “toward the best.”²⁰ Already in the passage under consideration Socrates emphasizes *the manner in which* he attempts the political art; for he says he attempts the political art *truly* – “*hōs alēthōs*.” The adverbial clause is designed to differentiate the practice of Socratic politics from the standard practice of Athenian politics. But the qualification is more than a mere differentiation; for the practice of Socratic politics *is* the attempt to speak truth, and in so speaking, to reveal the nature of things and to uncover the possibilities of community that emerge when words are oriented by a concern for what is best.

From its earliest beginnings in ancient Greek epic poetry, “*alētheia*” has always been intimately linked to the domain of saying.²¹ In Homer, the term appears in everyday contexts in which someone asks for a response that uncovers the reality of things.²² The tradition that connects truth with ways of speaking that are at once directed toward determinate

¹⁹ He seems to emphasize the status of the activity as a τέχνη insofar as calling it simply a “πολιτική” would have been sufficient to establish it as a kind of τέχνη. Lyons suggests that “the form in -ική may be used indifferently with or without τέχνη and in either case it will be picked up by τέχνη with equal readiness.” Lyons, *Structural Semantics*, 143.

²⁰ This legomenological approach in which we attend to the manner in which τέχνη is said in the dialogue will require suspending some of what has been said about τέχνη in the literature. Specifically, as Nussbaum notes, τέχνη is closely associated with ἐπιστήμη in Greek at least up to Plato’s time. See Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 94. Her account relies heavily on Aristotle’s understanding of τέχνη, which she associates with its four features: (1) universality, (2) teachability, (3) precision, and (4) a concern with explanation. She herself takes issue with Irwin, who insists that a τέχνη is directed toward an identifiable external end or product. See Irwin, *Plato’s Moral Theory*, 73–4. Roochnik has an eloquent and convincing critique of Nussbaum and Irwin on the question of the meaning of τέχνη in Plato. With reference to the specific passage in the *Gorgias* with which we are concerned, Roochnik recognizes that the πολιτική τέχνη Socrates here says he attempts is a nontraditional kind of τέχνη indeed. See Roochnik, *Of Art and Wisdom: Plato’s Understanding of Techne*, 192. For an account of what a “legomenological approach” entails, see Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, 6–7.

²¹ Heribert Boeder, “Der Frühgriechische Wortgebrauch Von Logos Und Aletheia,” *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 4 (1959): 94.

²² For a detailed discussion of the history of truth in Ancient Greek culture and philosophy, see Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, 21–48.

individuals in concrete social-political contexts and concerned to uncover the nature of things is heard throughout the *Gorgias*. This is clear already in the dialogue's first iteration of "*alētheia*" when Chaerephon poses the question to Gorgias: "Is Callicles here speaking the truth (*alēthē legei*), that you claim to answer whatever anyone asks you?" To this, Gorgias responds: "*Alēthē*" – "it is true."²³ This is, indeed, the first word Plato puts into the mouth of Gorgias, suggesting already that the question concerning the speaking of truth will be a matter of central importance to the discussion. This suggestion is reinforced by the adverbial qualification Socrates inserts into the center of his articulation of the political art he attempts. Perhaps, then, deeper insight into both the practice of Socratic politics and the politics of Platonic writing will be gained by following an itinerary through the *Gorgias* in which the speaking of truth is heard to lend determination to the *politikē technē* attempted by Socrates and Plato both. Such an itinerary will also lend insight into the extent to which the true political art has the capacity, as Callicles had recognized, to turn our common life as human beings upside down. For the terms championed by each interlocutor with whom Socrates speaks in the *Gorgias* – rhetoric over dialogue, power over truth, politics over philosophy – are shown to be reversed in the course of the dialogue as Socrates articulates an understanding of *technē* as erotically oriented toward the best.²⁴ And because the model for this *technē* is doctoring, it is perhaps appropriate to understand this reversal in more organic language, for what the *Gorgias* shows is that rhetoric is rooted in dialogue, power in truth, and politics in the practice of philosophy.

GORGIAS: ARTICULATING A TRUE RHETORIC

What begins as a question "concerning the power that belongs to the man's art, and what it is he proclaims and teaches" quickly becomes an

²³ *Gorgias*, 447d7–448a1.

²⁴ Rocco has suggested that this list of dichotomies "remain the essentially contested terms in the agonistic economy of Plato's *Gorgias*." See Rocco, "Liberating Discourse: The Politics of Truth in Plato's *Gorgias*," 363. Although the *Gorgias* remains itself agonistic to the end, there is within the agonistic context a sort of friendship that emerges between Gorgias and Socrates.

instruction to ask: “Who is he?”²⁵ The transition is quick: Socrates says he is interested in learning about the *technē* Gorgias claims to practice and teach, and specifically about its power (*dunamis*). But when Callicles insists “there is nothing like asking the man himself,” Socrates implicitly refuses, directing Chaerephon to ask Gorgias who he is. The power of the art Gorgias claims to teach seems, thus, to be intimately related to the sort of person he is and the sorts of people he influences. Plato amplifies the importance of these connections by having the direct conversation between Gorgias and Socrates mediated by a display of ineptitude by their associates, each of whom shows himself to be incapable of dialogue.²⁶ Once Gorgias does in fact respond directly to Socrates, Socrates introduces the central tension at stake in his initial discussion with Gorgias, the difference between rhetoric and dialogue.²⁷ These initial encounters, then, suggest that the power of the *technē* one practices is intimately bound up with the sort of person one is and that both the art one proclaims and teaches and the life one lives are rooted fundamentally in the way one does things with words.

The conversation between Gorgias and Socrates is, in fact, marked by a concern not merely to identify the power of the art Gorgias claims to teach but, more importantly, by a concern to turn Gorgias toward the question of justice so as to allow this question to inform and guide his art of speaking. The dialogue between them is itself marked by a certain concern for justice that is heard in those moments of candor when Socrates reveals to Gorgias who he is and why he speaks the way he does. It would, indeed, be difficult to identify an interlocutor in the Platonic dialogues with whom Socrates uncovers more about his own ways of speaking than he does with Gorgias in the *Gorgias*.²⁸

²⁵ *Gorgias*, 447c–d.

²⁶ Interestingly, Socrates is shown to instruct Chaerephon in the dialogue as to precisely how to speak; Gorgias’ interaction with Polus is merely to move him out of the way so that the *lógos* might continue – Socrates is the only one in the dialogue shown actually attempting to teach.

²⁷ *Gorgias*, 448d9. Thus, Socrates speaks the word “ῥητορικὴ” for the first time in the dialogue, juxtaposing it explicitly with *διαλέγεσθαι*. This, of course, is a deepening of the initial dichotomy between the sort of *ἐπίδειξις* Gorgias has just performed and the *διαλέγεσθαι* Socrates seeks (447b6–c4).

²⁸ Something analogous happens between Socrates and Protagoras in the *Protagoras* when Socrates insists that the dialogue proceed in short speeches because he wants to examine the *lógos* well, although, as he suggests, this might also involve an examination of the one’s

Despite the generally antagonistic atmosphere, a genuine friendship seems to emerge between Socrates and Gorgias, a friendship nourished, it seems, by mutual respect, a certain playfulness, and, indeed, a strong commitment to candor.²⁹ Thus, although Socrates explicitly raises the question of frank speaking, or *parrhēsia*, only in the context of his discussion with Callicles, he puts *parrhēsia* into practice with Gorgias, uncovering the true motivations behind his own ways of speaking.³⁰ In speaking frankly about his own method, in attempting to articulate the

asking and answering. See *Protagoras*, 333c7–9 and 331c–d. For a discussion of this, see Long, “Crisis of Community,” 374–5n29.

²⁹ Weiss calls attention to the respect that seems to emerge between Socrates and Gorgias. See Weiss, Roslyn, “Oh, Brother! The Fraternity of Rhetoric and Philosophy in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” 200. Teloh sees Gorgias as “arrogant” but recognizes that Gorgias seems to “take a genuine interest in the remainder of the conversation,” even facilitating it at times. See Teloh, “Rhetoric, Refutation, and What Socrates Believes in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” 64. Fussi too recognizes the importance of the ongoing presence of Gorgias in the dialogue, but she also emphasizes that Gorgias, both as a stranger in Athens and as an orator selling his rhetoric, cannot be as candid as Socrates. See Fussi, “Socrates’ Refutation of Gorgias,” 125 and 144. The element of play can be heard at 449d5–7 when Socrates and Gorgias agree that Gorgias is doing an admirable job giving short answers.

³⁰ Monoson points to the six appearances of the term “*παρρησία*” in the dialogue – 487a3, 487b1, 47d5, 491e7–8, 492d2, and 521a6 – all of which occur in the discussion between Socrates and Callicles. See Monoson, *Plato’s Democratic Entanglements: Athenian Politics and the Practice of Philosophy*, 162. Given the extent to which *παρρησία* was one of the core values affirmed and cultivated by the Athenian citizenry, it is no surprise that the issue emerges explicitly as a theme in the context of a discussion between two Athenians. Socrates himself suggests that *παρρησία* would have been cultivated in Callicles, him “having been educated sufficiently, at least as many Athenians would assert . . .” (487b6–7). Socrates here implies his own disagreement with what many Athenians consider to be a good education. That Callicles shows himself to be incapable of frank speech further reinforces the irony of Socrates’ praise of Callicles for *παρρησία*. For a discussion of the extent to which *παρρησία* was a deeply held value of the Athenian democracy, see Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, 85–126. The question of whether Socrates is being frank when, at *Gorgias*, 486e6–488b1, he calls Callicles a touchstone of the adequacy of the truth concerning the things his soul believes is a matter of some debate. There Socrates suggests Callicles has knowledge, goodwill, and frankness, which makes him an ideal interlocutor for Socrates. The case against taking Socrates at his word with regard to knowledge and goodwill seems fairly straightforward as Callicles shows himself in the dialogue neither to possess knowledge nor to have goodwill toward Socrates. McKim makes the compelling argument that Socrates “is being just as ironical about frankness as he is about knowledge and goodwill.” McKim, “Shame and Truth in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” 40. Teloh agrees that Socrates’ praise of Callicles here is ironic; see Teloh, “Rhetoric, Refutation, and What Socrates Believes in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” 68. Dodds offers a different view, seeing Callicles as caring sincerely for Socrates and hearing Socrates’ praise of Callicles’ frankness as genuine. See Dodds, E. R., *Plato Gorgias*, 14 and 263. Even if we take Socrates as being ironic about Callicles’ specific characteristics, it is nevertheless possible to take Socrates seriously when he insists that their agreement would be “the complete truth.” See *Gorgias*, 487e7.

sort of person he is, Socrates uncovers a truth about his practice of philosophy that seems to have been compelling enough to Gorgias that he remains an active participant in the dialogue even after he has supposedly been shamed into defeat by Socrates. If, however, the political power of the words Socrates speaks to Gorgias is illustrated by their capacity to move Gorgias toward the best by turning his attention to the question of justice, Gorgias' continuing participation at decisive moments in the dialogue *shows* the degree to which the poetics of Platonic politics is concerned to demonstrate the power of a rhetoric rooted in the pursuit of truth.³¹ By tracing those moments of candor in which Socrates articulates why he speaks to Gorgias the way he does, we will begin to discern the deep connection between speaking truth and practicing the political art. By attending to the continuing presence of Gorgias in the dialogue, we will hear something of the true political art of Platonic writing.³²

There are two moments of candor in Socrates' dialogue with Gorgias worthy of attention in this context. The first is heard after Gorgias is led to agree that rhetoric is an art that, as Socrates says, "brings about and accomplishes everything by means of words."³³ But when asked about the nature of these things rhetoric does with words, Gorgias insists that they are "the greatest of human concerns, Socrates, and the best."³⁴ Socrates then seeks clarity on precisely what these greatest and best things, in fact, are, although after they agree that "rhetoric is a producer of persuasion," Socrates admits that he has a suspicion about the things with which rhetoric is concerned.³⁵ Here, however, Socrates inserts into the discussion an account of the sort of person he is as a

³¹ Stauffer has emphasized that Gorgias' continuing interventions in the dialogue are signs that "Socrates has succeeded in capturing his interest" and even that Gorgias has learned the importance of turning toward justice. See Stauffer, *The Unity of Plato's Gorgias*, 120–1. Kastely argues convincingly that Gorgias is more than a mere foil for Socrates, but is, in fact, an example of a rhetorician who understands his art as "existing for the benefit of the community." See Kastely, "In Defense of Plato's *Gorgias*," 99–100. Plato's writing reinforces the importance of this commitment to community by having Gorgias intervene at moments when the community of dialogue threatens to break down.

³² For a discussion of the friendship that emerges between Socrates and Gorgias with Nicolas Parra and Axelle Karera, listen to Long, Christopher P., "Digital Dialogue 21: Rhetoric and Philosophy" (<http://www.personal.psu.edu/cpl2/blogs/digitaldialogue/2009/12/digital-dialogue-21-rhetoric-and-philosophy.html>).

³³ *Gorgias*, 451d2–3.

³⁴ *Gorgias*, 451d7–8.

³⁵ *Gorgias*, 453a2–c1.

way of revealing to Gorgias the reason he continues to ask him about the things with which rhetoric is concerned rather than asserting his own suspicions straight away. “Listen, Gorgias,” Socrates begins, and in so beginning calls attention to the need to pay attention, “know well that I am one of those, as I persuade myself, who, if someone engages with another in dialogue, wants to know the very thing concerning which the *logos* exists. And I consider you to be such a person too.”³⁶ The gesture to persuasion as what offers Socrates insight into the sort person he is at once amplifies the connection between Gorgias and Socrates – for here they are said to be the same – and suggests that there is an element of suasion endemic to dialogue itself. Indeed, the desire to know the very thing about which they speak seems to animate their engagement with one another – or so Socrates hopes to persuade Gorgias. By revealing the sort of person he is, Socrates attempts to cultivate in Gorgias a shared desire to know the thing itself. Thus, he continues by emphasizing what motivates his desire to proceed by questioning rather than asserting his own suspicions: “It is not for your sake, but for the sake of the *logos*, in order that it might proceed forward in a way that makes what we are saying as evident (*kataphanes*) to us as possible.”³⁷ This process of questioning, however, cannot be construed to mean that Socrates is unconcerned with Gorgias as a person. To the contrary, that Gorgias is someone who *wants* to uncover the very thing about which they are speaking is the condition under which their dialogue proceeds. Strangely enough, however, Socrates conceals his suspicions momentarily in order to try to move Gorgias to become the sort of person Socrates says he considers him to be, namely, one who himself “wants to know the very thing concerning which their *logos* exists.”

Once Socrates leads Gorgias to articulate what Socrates had himself suspected – that rhetoric concerns the sort of persuasion that goes on in lawcourts and in crowds – there appears another moment of candor,

³⁶ *Gorgias*, 453a8–b3. The anacoluthon makes the passage difficult to get into English with sufficient nuance to capture the urgent manner in which Socrates reveals something decisive about himself in order to establish a deeper connection with Gorgias. Despite this difficulty, Dodds says this is “a natural and fairly common type of anacoluthon.” See Dodds, E. R., *Plato Gorgias*, 203.

³⁷ *Gorgias*, 453c2–4. Cf., *Protagoras*, 331c–d, 333c7–9, and note 28.

prompted again by the hyperbolic praise Gorgias has for the power of rhetoric. “It holds all powers together within itself,” says Gorgias as he launches into the famous story of how his brother, the doctor, is powerless without rhetoric if he is unable to persuade his patient to drink his medicine or submit to burning.³⁸ In this speech, however, Gorgias also evokes the example of the skilled boxer who must learn how to use the skill “in a just manner.”³⁹ By introducing the question of the just use of power here, Gorgias shows himself to be, like Socrates, concerned with justice, which, it seems, is the very thing concerning which their speech exists.

Recognizing the emergence of a shared erotic interest in the just, Socrates seeks to deepen the level of their connection. He begins by appealing to an experience he and Gorgias must share in discussions such as these when people allow the “desire to win” to distort their inquiry into “that which lies there before them in their speech.”⁴⁰ He goes on to say: “I fear in my dialogue with you, that you might take me to be speaking from a desire to win against you rather than for the matter at hand (*to pragma*) to become evident (*kataphanes genesthai*).”⁴¹ Here, Socrates uses words not only to deepen his relationship with Gorgias by uncovering what motivates the things he says, but also to direct their shared attention toward the attempt to use words in such a way that the nature of the matter at hand becomes evident. Thus, Socrates speaks truth as *alētheia* with Gorgias in a rich double sense, for his words *uncover* a common bond between them, affirming their shared concern for justice, even as they also *reveal* the degree to which this shared matter of concern will only become evident if they are able to speak together in ways that articulate its nature. Speaking truth is heard here to be capable at once of opening a space of community and of uncovering the nature of things. For this reason, Socrates seeks to root his relationship with Gorgias in a shared loyalty toward the truth, suggesting that they ought not to continue if Gorgias is not the same sort of person he is. Socrates puts it this way: “And what sort of person am I? The sort for whom it is a pleasure to be refuted, if I say something that is not true,

³⁸ *Gorgias*, 456a7–457c3.

³⁹ *Gorgias*, 456e3: “ἐπὶ τῷ δικάϊῳ.”

⁴⁰ *Gorgias*, 457c4–d5.

⁴¹ *Gorgias*, 457e3–5.

but who is pleased to refute if someone should say something that is not true, and no more displeased to be refuted than to refute.”⁴² Gorgias responds by affirming that he himself is just such a person, and in the course of the rest of the dialogue, he shows himself increasingly to be one who uses words to nourish the community of dialogue and to make what they are saying as evident as possible.

These two moments of truth cultivate in Gorgias a desire for truth that becomes manifest the moment he recognizes that if a person comes to him not knowing what is just and unjust, good and bad, beautiful and shameful, these things will need to be learned as part of the art of rhetoric itself. Gorgias is moved to this recognition by Socrates’ attempts to speak the truth to and with him. Thus, his dialogue with Gorgias must be heard as politics in practice, for Socrates speaks toward the best: he uses words to turn Gorgias’ attention toward the question of the just in such a way that it is felt to inform not only what he teaches but who he is. The art of rhetoric is here shown to be rooted in true dialogue. If, however, the power of Socratic politics is felt in the dialogue of truth that emerges between Gorgias and Socrates, the nature of the relationship between truth and power comes explicitly to language in the discussion with Polus, but only because Gorgias is willing to use words of his own to move the discussion in that direction.

POLUS: TURNING TOWARD THE BEST

Polus breaks into the dialogue between Socrates and Gorgias in order to insist that Gorgias was shamed (*ēischunthē*) into conceding something he himself did not believe, for, as Polus puts it: “who do you think would utterly deny either that he knew what is just or that he could teach it to others? It is totally provincial (*pollē agroikia*) to lead the *logos* to such things.”⁴³ For all his bravado, Polus speaks the truth here in two respects. First, even if he rejects its plausibility, Polus beautifully

⁴² *Gorgias*, 458a2–5.

⁴³ *Gorgias*, 461c2–3. The translation of “provincial” here does not, perhaps, capture the rudeness of Polus’ insult. Arieti and Barrus translate it as “redneck” in order to underscore the manner in which ἄγροικος “derives from a word for the rural countryside and carries connotations of roughness and boorishness.” See Arieti and Barrus, *Plato Gorgias*, 49n39.

articulates precisely what Socrates says about himself; for Socrates is just such a one to deny that he knows the just things and that he teaches them to others.⁴⁴ Second, even if he finds what Socrates does provincial, Polus speaks well when he says that Socrates “leads the *logos*” in a specific direction; for Socrates leads the *logos* precisely toward just things. Indeed, the power of speaking the truth we have been tracing in the dialogue lies in its ability to move others toward justice by means of words; but this involves cultivating in them a knowledge of their own ignorance of just things and a desire to know them. The interruption of Polus threatens to derail the *logos* from its path of truth.

Thus, when Polus finds himself at a loss about what Socrates is saying, Socrates attempts to return the *logos* to the truth. “Perhaps speaking the truth would be rather provincial (*agroikoteron*),”⁴⁵ he says, evoking the original insult by which Polus had interrupted his dialogue with Gorgias. Socrates then goes on to suggest that he hesitates, however, to speak the truth lest Gorgias imagine that he is satirizing his business.⁴⁶ Still, Socrates insists, “nothing became evident to us (*ēmin kataphanes egeneto*) from our recent *logos* about what he thinks it is.”⁴⁷ Here again, the connection between speaking the truth and allowing the matter of their dialogue to “become evident” is emphasized. Now for a third time, Socrates has sought to redirect the conversation toward the question of justice and the best by appealing to the importance of allowing the matter at hand to become “*kataphanes*” – evident.⁴⁸ The adjective is derived from the verb “*kataphainō*,” which means “to declare” or to make clear by words.⁴⁹ Each time it appears in the dialogue, Socrates is attempting to turn the discussion toward the question of justice and the best and

⁴⁴ See *Apology*: regarding knowledge, see 21d–e; regarding never being anyone’s teacher, see 33a–b.

⁴⁵ *Gorgias*, 462e6.

⁴⁶ Arieti and Barrus are right to suggest that the echo of Polus’ use of the term *ἀγροικός* indicates that Socrates is being sarcastic. See Arieti and Barrus, *Plato Gorgias*, 51n42. The sarcasm is directed at Polus and designed to reorient the encounter between them toward the truth. Socrates’ professed concern for the feelings of Gorgias is perhaps more genuine, for Socrates has shown himself, like a good host, to be concerned with the feelings of his guest. Together, the repetition of Polus’ original insult and the gesture of guest friendship toward Gorgias show Socrates to be rather urbane.

⁴⁷ *Gorgias*, 463a1–2.

⁴⁸ The word “*καταφανής*” appears three times in the dialogue, 453c4, 457e5, and here at 463a2.

⁴⁹ *Καταφαίνω*, v. Liddell and Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*.

to avoid the impression – which animates Polus’ intervention – that the things being said are intended to put Gorgias to shame. And each time “*kataphanes*” is itself declared, Gorgias responds by urging Socrates to continue, just as he does here, when he re-enters the dialogue, insisting that Socrates “speak, and have no shame on my account.”⁵⁰

Socrates may thus be heard to practice a declarative politics in which words are used to allow the matter at hand to become evident and new communities of relation are opened by what is thus made clear.⁵¹ In this context, the attempt to make the nature of the power of rhetoric evident involves articulating an elaborate analogy between the care of the soul and that of the body in which two arts (*technai*) concerning each are set against two experiences (*empeiriai*) in order to reveal the degree to which the way Polus does things with words is perverted by an unhealthy conception of power. However, the difference between the reality of health and its appearance is established in dialogue, not with Polus, but with Gorgias, who affirms the distinction by telling Socrates: “you speak the truth.”⁵² The truth Socrates speaks here both articulates the difference between the art and the experience of politics and uncovers two dimensions of what Socrates later calls his own political “*technē*.”⁵³

The first difference Socrates articulates between the art and the experience of politics involves the end toward which it is directed. As arts, politics and the care of the body “attend always toward the best (*aei pros to beltiston*).”⁵⁴ The words here anticipate those Socrates will use to describe his own practice of politics as a *technē*, which involves saying things, as we have heard, always “*pros to beltiston*” – toward the best. Socrates however brings the significance of this formulation into focus by juxtaposing it explicitly with a way of speaking he characterizes

⁵⁰ *Gorgias*, 463a5.

⁵¹ For a discussion of the nature of “declarative saying” and the manner in which it opens the question of truth as a matter of justice, see Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, 72–115.

⁵² *Gorgias*, 464a5–6.

⁵³ The analogy, elaborate and complex, begins at 464b2, with Socrates calling them to “come along and, if I have the power, I will display for you more clearly what I am saying.” Socrates’ ability, δύνάμει, to make things clear with words is both the beginning and a main theme of the speech laying out the difference between the art of and the knack for politics. Kahn recognizes this speech as the beginning of “the positive exposition of this conception of politics” as a τέχνη that is “spread throughout the dialogue.” See Kahn, “Drama and Dialectic in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” 101.

⁵⁴ *Gorgias*, 464c4.

as mere pandering. In so doing, Socrates directs his attention to Polus rather than Gorgias. This is what he says:

I call this pandering and I say it is shameful, Polus – for this I am saying toward you – because it aims at pleasure without what is best. And I say it is not a *technē*, but an experience, for it has no *logos* at all about the nature of the things it brings about or bears upon – whatever they may be; and thus, it has no ability to say what is responsible [*tēn aitian*] for each. I don't call a thing without *logos* [*alolon*], a *technē*.⁵⁵

This passage has been taken to establish “rationality” as a condition for calling something an art.⁵⁶ But that translation fails to capture the rich significance of the *logos* Socrates seeks to clarify by putting into practice. For Socrates, a *technē* is able to give an account of the nature of the things it brings about and bears upon, an account Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles show themselves to be incapable of articulating. To be without *logos* is to be unable to say what is responsible for each of the things the art is undertaken to accomplish or affect. By explicitly directing his words to Polus as he establishes the difference between the art of politics and pandering, Socrates attempts not only to speak the truth about politics as a way of speaking toward the best but also to use words to turn Polus toward the best by holding him accountable to the nature of the things he does with words.

This question of accountability bears upon the intimate connection between speaking the truth and power, a connection Polus is unable to

⁵⁵ *Gorgias*, 464e2–465a6.

⁵⁶ Gould identifies three characteristics of a *τέχνη*: it should involve a “rational procedure” and have “comparative rarity and dependability.” See Gould, *The Development of Plato's Ethics*, 34. Irwin argues that, because crafts are rational, are teachable, and involve clearly delineated objective methods for settling questions, Socrates “has good reasons for thinking that real virtue . . . will be a craft . . .” Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory*, 73–5. Nussbaum has been highly critical of this view of *τέχνη*, because it lends itself to an instrumental view of ethical deliberation. See Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 97–8. This, however, is only one of the limitations of the view, for the deeper issue is that it reduces the rich complexity of the Greek “*λόγος*” to only one of its meanings and imports a modern understanding of rationality into an ancient idea that is rooted in our deepest encounters with things. Far the better approach is to determine the meaning of *ἄλογον* by attending to the way Socrates appeals to the *λόγος* in relation to it. Roochnik, who agrees with Nussbaum against Irwin and Gould, approaches the question of *τέχνη* in Plato much in the spirit of the present account, by attending to how the term appears in the dialogues. See Roochnik, *Of Art and Wisdom: Plato's Understanding of Techne*, 5.

recognize because his conception of power is perverted. For Polus, power is “the ability to do in the city whatever seems best for oneself.”⁵⁷ Socrates responds to this understanding of power by introducing a distinction between “doing what one wants” and “doing what seems best” that forces Polus to attend to the question of the best and the deep connection humans have to it.⁵⁸ In changing the way we speak about power, Socrates attempts to change the way we seek power through speaking. For Socrates, “doing what one wants” is identified with just actions that are good for the community and thus for the individual, while “doing what seems best to one” is associated with the arbitrary freedom of the tyrant. Socrates insists that in making this distinction, he is speaking the truth.⁵⁹ Attempting to refute him, Polus introduces the example of the alleged happiness of Archelaus, tyrant of Macedonia, who perpetrates many injustices, doing what seems best to him. When Polus suggests that Socrates would probably also claim not to know if the Great King of Persia is happy, Socrates responds, saying: “And I would be saying the truth (*Kai alēthē ge erō*), for I do not know how he is with respect to education and justice (*paideias hopōs echei kai dikaiousunēs*).”⁶⁰ As directed to Polus, these words are designed to reinforce Socrates’ claim to truth and undermine Polus’ suggestion earlier that even a child could refute the truth of the things Socrates

⁵⁷ *Gorgias*, 469c5–6.

⁵⁸ Socrates establishes the distinction between “doing what they want” – “ποιεῖν ὃν βούλονται” — and “doing what seems best to them” – “ποιεῖν . . . ὅτι ἂν αὐτοῖς δόξῃ βέλτιστον εἶναι” — at 466d8–e2.

⁵⁹ Socrates insists that he speaks the truth at *Gorgias*, 468c7–8 and 468e3; Polus contests it at 470c4–5.

⁶⁰ *Gorgias*, 470e6–7. If we attend to the way Plato writes what Socrates says here, we gain insight into a dimension of Platonic politics as well, for the formulation – *Καὶ ἀληθῆ γε ἐρῶ* – is morphologically ambiguous. The word “ἐρῶ” can be read, as it is translated here, as the first person present subjunctive active of εἰπεῖν, which means “to say.” But morphologically, “ἐρῶ” can also be the first person subjunctive present of ἐράω, which means “to love,” thus making the phrase read: “And I would be loving the truth.” While this would be a plausible translation of the phrase even in this context, the formulation as written could be read in yet a more striking way; for if we take “ἐρῶ” as a second person singular present imperative middle-passive of ἐράω, we would need to hear it as enjoining the individual reader to “Love truth!” Such a translation would not fit well into the present context, but what shows itself in the writing – namely, the injunction to love truth and to understand this love as bound up with the question of a good education and a concern for justice – says something decisive about the politics of Platonic writing. If Socrates uses words to move Polus to a deeper understanding of the power of words rooted in a concern for justice, Plato writes in such a way to move us similarly.

says. They also make the question of happiness one of education and justice, both of which turn out to be central to Socrates' understanding of the political art as a practice of speaking the truth.

The politics of truth is not simply a matter of speaking toward the best but is also concerned with moving the determinate individual with whom it is engaged in dialogue to consider the question of justice. Thus, in his discussion with Polus, Socrates claims truth as his birth-right, insisting that it requires the witness not of many but of one.⁶¹ He puts it this way: "If I do not bring you yourself forward as one witness to agree with the things concerning which I speak, I think that I have accomplished nothing worth speaking about concerning the things of which our *logos* is about."⁶² Socrates reinforces this a moment later when he claims not to be a politician in the traditional sense precisely because he only knows how to bring forth a witness of one, namely, as he says: "the very one toward whom there is a *logos* for me."⁶³ By formulating it this way, Socrates emphasizes that the *logos* exists for him *as directed toward* the one with whom he speaks. Thus, the politics of truth speaks in two directions. It speaks at once toward the best and yet also toward the one with whom it is engaged. To do this well, however, as Socrates does, one must remain attuned always at once to the question of the best and to the determinate individual with whom one is speaking. Thus, in attempting to turn Polus toward the just, Socrates appeals to provocative examples that challenge the way Polus understands the nature of power. First, in order to uncover the truth that force is not power, Socrates offers the example of a dagger brandished in the crowded marketplace, which is said to be "a wonderful piece of

⁶¹ *Gorgias*, 472b4–c1. Indeed, Socrates enjoins: "don't try to separate me from my very being and the truth (ἐκβάλλειν με ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας καὶ τοῦ ἀληθοῦς)." Dodds recognizes that the addition of "καὶ τοῦ ἀληθοῦς" is expegetical, thus, "added to explain the metaphorical use of 'τῆς οὐσίας'." While he is likely correct to suggest that this term is to be taken in the sense of one's material inheritance, its meaning remains saturated with the more philosophical sense of "substance, or being." Thus, Dodds underestimates what is at stake in the *Gorgias* when he insists: "Polus might rob Socrates of a true opinion, but could hardly rob him of his substantial existence." See Dodds, E. R., *Plato Gorgias*, 245. That Socrates' substantial existence is at stake is made clear by the appeal, in the present context, to what the many Athenians will think if he brings witnesses against him (472a2–5) and, in the discussion with Callicles, when the possible trial and execution of Socrates is explicitly evoked (486a7–d1; 521b4–d4).

⁶² *Gorgias*, 472b6–c1.

⁶³ *Gorgias*, 474a6.

tyrannical power (*dunamis tis kai turannis*)” that would allow him to do whatever seems best to him.⁶⁴ Second, however, Socrates provocatively turns the values Polus embraces on their head, advocating that if we truly want to harm our enemies, we should contrive a way for them to escape and not pay a just penalty.⁶⁵ Although the things Socrates says here are directed toward Polus, and toward the best, they are, as we have heard, more effective in moving Callicles into the dialogue than they are in moving Polus to consider more deeply how his own words relate or fail to relate to the best. Nevertheless, a deeper understanding of the relationship between truth and power has been gained in dialogue with Polus, for power is now understood to be rooted in an ability to speak truth both toward the best and toward the one with whom one is engaged.

CALLICLES: ATTEMPTING A TRUE POLITICS

Moved by these Socratic provocations, Callicles attacks Socrates as a “true demagogue” who, while “claiming to pursue truth,” in fact engages in “disgusting demagoguery.”⁶⁶ Again, the dialogue is animated by the contested question of truth, which here leads Callicles to accuse Socrates of deceptively playing with the distinction between nature and law, *physis* and *nomos*, “working wickedness with words,” as he puts it.⁶⁷ With these words, Callicles has indeed touched the root of the Socratic practice of politics, for in attempting to move people by speaking truth, Socrates does not respect the manner in which Callicles understands the relationship between *physis* and *nomos*.⁶⁸ For Callicles, the use of force is

⁶⁴ *Gorgias*, 469d1–e8. Jaeger is right to insist that Socrates takes the notion of power as the ability to do what one wants and transforms it. See Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vols. II, 134. If the idea of power Polus embraces may be called force, then Socrates might be said to advocate for a conception of power as the ability, cultivated by good education and a concern for justice, to use words to turn the community toward the best.

⁶⁵ *Gorgias*, 480e5–b5.

⁶⁶ *Gorgias*, 482a5, 482c5, and e3–5.

⁶⁷ *Gorgias*, 483a2–3.

⁶⁸ Saxonhouse recognizes that Socrates does shift back and forth between φύσις and νόμος, pointing to 474c and 478a, b, and d. See Saxonhouse, “An Unspoken Theme in Plato’s *Gorgias*: War,” 147–8. She recognizes that Callicles is attempting to “unite the two concepts in a startling new phrase ‘the law of nature’ (*nomos tes physeos*, 483e), a law of

by nature just; it is, indeed, the very “law of nature, though perhaps not in accord with the one we ourselves make.”⁶⁹ For Socrates, as we have heard, true power is not a matter of moving others by force but an ability to speak toward the best. Thus, although Socrates never explicitly inverts Callicles’ bold formulation about the “law of nature,” his suggestion that it is not only by convention that doing injustice is more shameful than suffering it but also by nature implies that it might be necessary to think more deeply about the nature of law. Indeed, Socrates claims that Callicles is likely not to have been speaking the truth when he set up the opposition between *physis* and *nomos*, for there is a sense in which *nomos* itself grows out of a natural attempt to articulate the truth of things.⁷⁰ But it is not that human conventions simply express the nature of things straightaway; rather, they are rooted in an originary experience with things that is capable of moving humans together in healthy ways if the words we speak to and with one another are animated by a concern to uncover the truth. Callicles himself lays claim to a different truth: that excellence and happiness are “luxury, licentiousness and freedom, if [each] is held with mercenary force.”⁷¹ All conventions contrary to this natural law of force are, according to Callicles, worthless. And even when Socrates leads Callicles through the implications of this alleged “truth” – a journey that ends at the life of a catamite – Callicles cannot proceed, for he shows himself to have no relationship with the truth, no ability to be moved by anything other than a desire for gratification, and no ideal toward which his words might be held accountable.⁷²

inequality supported by nature herself, as seen among animals and most significantly among nations where the question of right (*dike*) is only spoken of, but not followed.” Fussi understands how the distinction between φύσις and νόμος is used in the dialogue to give rise to the opposition between philosophy and politics. See Fussi, “Callicles’ Examples of *Nomos Tes Phuseos* in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” 119. As we will hear, however, Socrates attempts to blur the difference because he wants to root politics in philosophy. Jaeger ascribes to Plato a position we hear Socrates seeking to establish in his discussion with Callicles: Plato “did not think of nature (as the sophistic teachers did) as raw material out of which education was to form a work of art; he thought it was the highest aretē, which is only incompletely manifested in individual man.” See Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, II, 134.

⁶⁹ *Gorgias*, 483e1–4.

⁷⁰ *Gorgias*, 489a8–b6.

⁷¹ *Gorgias*, 492c3–6.

⁷² For the catamite, see *Gorgias*, 494e4. Callicles himself insists that his continuing in discussion with Socrates is due simply to a desire “to gratify Gorgias here” (501c7–8). Buzzetti claims that Callicles does not have the ability to recognize that justice places

In order to hold this account itself accountable to something beyond mere gratification, Socrates directs Callicles to attend to “that concerning which these *logoi* exist for us,” which he identifies as “the way it is necessary for one to live, whether it be the life to which you call me, doing the things of a real man, speaking to the populace and training in rhetoric and being political in the way you people engage in politics nowadays, or if it is this life in philosophy, and whatever it is about this life that differs from that.”⁷³ To delineate this life from that, Socrates returns to the analogy between the care of the soul and the care of the body he had established with Gorgias in the discussion with Polus.⁷⁴ In so doing, Socrates lends further determination to the meaning of his own *politikē technē*. The difference between the practice of popular politics and the life of philosophy is articulated in terms of the difference between the knack for cooking tasty foods and the art of doctoring. Here again Socrates emphasizes that doctoring is an art precisely because it “looks to the nature of the one upon whom it attends, acts from what is responsible and has a *logos* to give about these things.”⁷⁵ Socrates goes on to suggest that there is a similar art concerning the soul, which “also has some forethought (*promētheia*) concerning what is best for the soul.”⁷⁶ Thus, in wrapping the political activity he claims to practice in the mantle of a *technē*, Socrates seems to embrace three abilities at once: first, the ability *to look into the nature of the one with whom one is engaged*; second, the ability *to act rooted in an understanding of what is responsible for the present condition of the one for whom one cares*; and third, the ability *to thoughtfully anticipate what is best for the soul of the one for*

demands upon us. See Buzzetti, “The Injustice of Callicles and the Limits of Socrates’s Ability to Educate a Young Politician,” 26–7. Tarnopolsky argues that it is ultimately the catamite example that succeeds in shaming Callicles; see Tarnopolsky, *Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants*, 81. Teloh calls it a “shocking attempt at coercive persuasion;” see Teloh, “Rhetoric, Refutation, and What Socrates Believes in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” 68. As we have suggested, Socrates had managed to move Callicles to engage him in discussion by provoking Polus; here, however, Callicles shows himself capable of moving only so far. He is provoked to speak by the desire to shame Socrates, and, presumably, the pleasure he believed he himself would gain in the process. Now, when he is invited to allow the desire for truth to orient his engagement with others, he becomes recalcitrant.

⁷³ *Gorgias*, 500c1–8.

⁷⁴ See *Gorgias*, 464b2–466a3, p. 20, above.

⁷⁵ *Gorgias*, 501a1–3.

⁷⁶ *Gorgias*, 501b2–5.

whom one is concerned.⁷⁷ These three abilities are intimately bound up with the ability “to give a *logos* concerning these things,” a *logos* we have now heard to be rooted in the attempt to speak truth with an eye toward justice. This way of speaking might, indeed, be called a certain kind of rhetoric, and Socrates goes so far as to say that such a rhetoric would be “a beautiful thing, preparing the souls of the citizens such that they will be the best possible, and striving earnestly to say the best things, whether they are pleasing or more unpleasant to those listening.”⁷⁸ These words lend depth and determination to Socrates’ articulation of his own political practice as a *technē*. Indeed, Socrates has been practicing this *technē* with Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles all along – as, in the *Protagoras*, he was similarly shown to practice this art of politics with Hippocrates and Protagoras – for the things Socrates says demonstrate that he has discerned the nature of the soul of each, that he understands what is responsible for their present conditions, and that he has an anticipatory understanding of what is best for them.

The analogy with the art of doctoring that runs through and connects Socrates’ discussion with his three listeners in the *Gorgias* further enriches the manner in which Socratic politics must be understood as an art of speaking. Appealing to the way the word “healthy” points to the ordered arrangement of the body from which “health” comes to be present in bodies, Socrates suggests that there is a certain “law,” or “*nomos*,” an ordered arrangement of the soul from which the soul too becomes “law-abiding,” *nomimon* – that is, healthy. Justice and temperance are two such laws.⁷⁹ The return to the question of the law here suggests the degree to which the law itself is rooted in the natural operations of the soul. Socrates implies by this a reversal of Callicles’ “law of nature,” suggesting that the nature of law is to ensure the healthy

⁷⁷ In the *Protagoras*, Socrates is shown to embody these three abilities in his relationship with Hippocrates. There too, he embraces Prometheus as a hero, playing on his name, which points to a sort of care taking (προμηθεύμενος), to suggest that his conversation with Protagoras is concerned not only for the whole life of Hippocrates but with the course of his own life as well. See *Prot.*, 361d2–4, [chapter 2](#).

⁷⁸ *Gorgias*, 503a7–9. Just prior to this, Socrates had spoken of this beautiful rhetoric as “always speaking towards the best,” a formulation that echoes the things Socrates said about politics as the care of the soul at 464c4 and anticipates the formulation by which he articulates his own political art as a ways of speaking toward the best at 521d6–e2.

⁷⁹ *Gorgias*, 504c7–d3.

life of the community. This is brought about, however, only by ways of speaking that are “artful and good.” The one who practices the beautiful rhetoric of philosophical politics, then, will be one who looks toward justice and temperance, as the doctor looks toward the healthy orderings of the body, and as Socrates emphasizes, he “will bring them to bear on our souls in speaking speeches and in all actions.”⁸⁰ This articulates well what it means to “attempt the political art truly,” which Socrates claims is the way he is one of few now living who does political things. Politics is thus heard to be rooted in philosophy.

THE POETICS OF PLATONIC POLITICS

If, however, the practice of Socratic politics involves, as we have heard, speaking and thus acting in ways that are attuned to the concrete individual and directed toward justice and the best, we are now in a position to recognize how Platonic writing performs a similar political practice with us. The text has been crafted in such a way that each of us is led to consider the health of our souls and the course of our own lives. The path of truth that runs like Ariadne’s thread through the *Gorgias* has led us to this recognition and stands as an example of the poetics of Platonic politics. It is Gorgias who first enunciates “truth” in the dialogue, and as he is led to recognize the political power endemic to the attempt to speak truth with an eye toward justice, we are made to feel the power of words to do political things. The loyalty to the *logos* Socrates is able to cultivate in Gorgias appears in the discussion with Polus when the true difference between a *technē* and an experience is established, and we are made aware of a central difference between them, for a *technē* attends always “toward the best” (*pros to beltiston*). Plato has Socrates repeat this formulation – *pros to beltiston* – when he articulates the beautiful rhetoric, artful and good, that is able to move others by words to consider the health of their souls. That someone in the dialogue has been so moved is evident when Gorgias speaks up to save the *logos* between Socrates and Callicles from a premature end. Gorgias’ words testify to the power of Socratic politics, for he admits,

⁸⁰ *Gorgias*, 504d6–8.

“I myself want (*boulomai*) to hear you go through the things remaining yourself.”⁸¹ The desire he expresses here is rooted in a concern for a *logos* articulated toward the best and thus stands in tension with what might seem best for Gorgias, given his own interest in procuring students. Yet, by making these the last words Gorgias speaks in the dialogue, Plato invites us to consider how they empower Socrates to continue along a road that leads not only to the articulation of a practice of politics determined as the art of speaking the truth but also ultimately to a myth that is said to be a *logos* precisely because it is spoken *as true*.⁸² Socrates puts it this way: “Listen to a quite beautiful *logos*, as they say, which you will consider a myth, but I, indeed, think it is a *logos*, for I will be saying the things I am about to say as true.”⁸³ The details of the story in which we are judged naked in body and soul, by naked judges who are able to see us for what we have done and thus for who we are, is, indeed,

⁸¹ *Gorgias*, 506b2–3. The manner in which Plato has Gorgias appear here in the *Gorgias* as someone who has been brought to some degree by Socrates to concern himself with the truth is at odds both with the picture Plato puts into the mouth of Meno in the *Meno* and with what some have discerned in the writings of the historical Gorgias. With respect to the latter, in texts like *On Non-Being*, *Encomium to Helen*, and *Defense of Palamedes*, Gorgias has seemed to some uninterested in and perhaps even disdainful of “the truth.” Segal, for example, suggests that Gorgias’ art is “deliberately and explicitly opposed to ‘truth’ . . .” See Segal, “Gorgias and the Psychology of the Logos,” 112. This seems to resonate with what Meno is made to say about Gorgias in the *Meno*, namely that he would never promise to teach virtue and that “he laughs at the others whenever he hears them promising this. But he thinks it is necessary to make people clever at speaking” (*Meno*, 95c1–4). Of course, Segal’s characterization of Gorgias has itself been called into question, for example, by Valiavitcharska, who argues that Gorgias’ understanding of “correct *logos*” implies a commitment to a kind of truth. See Valiavitcharska, “Correct Logos and Truth in Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*,” 160. We need not, however, wade into these debates; for questions concerning the attitude the historical Gorgias had toward truth or even concerning Meno’s offhanded characterization of Gorgias as disdainful of those who promise to teach virtue do not bear upon the interpretation of the *Gorgias* offered here. This interpretation has sought only to uncover the manner in which the figure of Gorgias appears in the context of the *Gorgias* in order first to articulate the manner in which the dramatic character interacts with the character of Socrates and, second, to discern something of what Plato was trying to teach about the intimate connection between rhetoric and philosophy by writing a Gorgias capable of joining Socrates in his attempt to speak toward the best – that is, to attempt the πολιτικὴ τέχνη.

⁸² For a discussion with Sara Brill of the manner in which Plato uses myth in the dialogues generally, and for political purposes also in the *Phaedo*, in particular, listen to Long, Christopher P., “Digital Dialogue 13: Psychology and Politics” (<http://www.personal.psu.edu/cpl2/blogs/digitaldialogue/2009/09/digital-dialogue-13-psychology-and-politics.html>). See too Brill, “The Geography of Finitude: Myth and Earth in Plato’s *Phaedo*.”

⁸³ *Gorgias*, 523a1–3.

beautiful. But the truth of it lies in the way the story enjoins each of us who encounter it to consider the degree to which we ourselves are living a healthy life in body and soul, a life that Socrates describes at the end of the dialogue as an *attempt*. Of his life, of the practice of his philosophy, and so also of his attempt to do political things, Socrates says, “I will try, by practicing truth, to live by being the best I can possibly be, and, when I die, to die that way too.”⁸⁴ Crafted by Plato, these words, like all the words in the dialogue, put truth into practice by attempting to speak toward the best, and by seeking in so speaking to turn us, you and me, toward the question of justice as that erotic ideal that opens the possibility of true human political community. This practice of truth marks Platonic as much as Socratic political philosophy, as a reading of the *Phaedo*, to which we now turn, suggests; for its most vivid depiction of Socrates dying illustrates with ineluctable poignancy the political power of this practice of truth.

⁸⁴ *Gorgias*, 526d5–e1.

4 THE POLITICS OF FINITUDE

Between the last words of Socrates and the last words of the *Phaedo* lies the difference, and the connection, between Socratic and Platonic politics. As the hemlock worked its way to his abdomen and toward his very heart, Socrates uncovered (*ekkalupsamenos*) his head and spoke his famous final words: “Crito, we owe a rooster to Asclepius, pay the debt and do not be careless (*kai mē amelēsēte*).”¹ Although much has been written about the significance of these final instructions concerning the debt to Asclepius, the words to which Socrates dedicates his final breath draw the things he had said previously in the dialogue into succinct relief; indeed, its very articulation embodies the content and practice of Socratic philosophy.² The mood of the verb is subjunctive, giving it an air of contingency; its command, like the voice of the Socratic *daimonion*, is prohibitive; its aspect, like the person himself, is

¹ All references to the *Phaedo* are from Plato, *Platonis Opera*, 1995. *Phaedo*, 118a7–8.

² In the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche says this about Socrates’ reference to the sacrifice of a rooster for Asclepius: “This ridiculous and terrible ‘last word’ means for those who have ears: ‘Crito, life is a disease.’” Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 272. Zehnpfennig suggests that the disease is “Unvernunft” and the proposed remedy “die Philosophie.” See Plato, *Phaidon*, 206. There seem to be two orthodox interpretations of the passage in the literature. One assumes the reference to Asclepius refers to an actual debt, the other that it is metaphorical, referring to a disease of which Socrates has been healed. Madison cites the relevant interpretations in each case. See Madison, “Have We Been Careless with Socrates’ Last Words?,” 421. For her part, Madison emphasizes the importance of the last phrase. Her reading, affirmed in what follows, argues that the last phrase, “καὶ μὴ ἀμελήσητε,” articulated in the second person plural, involves an injunction to all there present not to be careless with their souls. Further, she suggests that Socrates’ claim that the debt is *owed* to Asclepius indicates that the favor has been granted. See *ibid.*, 432. That would still lend itself to Zehnpfennig’s reading, but not to Nietzsche’s, for the debt would only be owed after Socrates’ death. Nietzsche’s ears did not seem to hear these important subtleties.

simple; the phrase, rhetorically speaking, is a litotes, the trope of understatement, so suggestive of Socratic irony. These final words are haunting reminders of the life Socrates lived. And yet, they are not the final words of the dialogue.

Crito, agreeing to do these things, asks him a final question – “but see if you have anything else to say” – but Socrates performs his final response, as Phaedo reports that “he no longer answered.”³ Phaedo goes on to describe how, after a short time, Socrates stirred, the executioner uncovered his face, and Crito then closed his mouth and eyes forever. Then, evoking Echecrates, Phaedo says: “This was the end of our friend, a man, as we might say, who was, among those of that time we experienced, the best and, wholly, the most thoughtful and most just (*tōn tote hōn epeirathēmen aristou kai allōs phronimōtatou kai dikaiotatou*).”⁴ The verb here is carefully chosen, for it derives from “*peiraō*,” “to make a trial or proof of,” here taking on the meaning of “experiencing” yet in the deep sense of assaying.⁵ The string of superlatives testifies to those of us who were not there the deep effect this singular man had on those who were. And the careful, caring insertion of the little phrase “*kai allōs*” gives, according to John Burnet, the entire sentence the calm air of tragedy.

The continuity between Socrates’ life and death, between *his* last words and the last words of the dialogue, is reinforced by the manner in which the structures of the two moments resonate with one another. Both moments are rife with references to time and embodiment. Phaedo leads Echecrates to the last words of Socrates by following the movement of the hemlock through his body: his legs grew heavy, he lay on his back, “time elapsed (*dialipōn chronon*),” the executioner examined his feet and legs, gave his foot a pinch, then his thighs, then, touching Socrates, the executioner said he would be gone when the poison reached his heart.⁶ When his abdomen had begun to grow cold, Socrates is said to have “uncovered (*ekkalupsamenos*) himself – for he

³ *Phaedo*, 118a11. It is not insignificant and is indeed supportive of Madison’s position, although she does not marshal this particular evidence, that Crito says “*Ἀλλὰ ταῦτα . . . ἔσται*,” “these things will be,” referring not to a single request, but to more than one: (1) paying the debt and (2) be not careless.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 118a15–7.

⁵ *πειράω*, v. Liddell and Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*.

⁶ *Phaedo*, 117e4–118a1.

had covered (*enekekalupto*) himself” before speaking his final words.⁷ Similarly, Plato leads us to Phaedo’s last words of the dialogue by writing of time, motion, and uncovering. When Crito received no response to his final question, “a little time elapsed (*oligon chronon dialipōn*),” Socrates stirred, and the executioner “uncovered him completely (*exekalupsen*).”⁸ Crito shut Socrates’ mouth and eyes before Phaedo spoke his final words. The space between the last words of Socrates and the last words of the dialogue marks the interval between the life of the man and his afterlife as a memory.⁹

Three iterations of the verb “*ekkaluptō*” – to uncover – mark the transition between life and death.¹⁰ This play of uncovering and covering, cast as it is in the context of Phaedo’s report to Echecrates who had asked at the beginning about “the things the man said before his death,”¹¹ weaves the question of the possibility of truth in a life conditioned by finitude into that space between the life and death of Socrates, at once amplifying it and situating it in its proper place. Truth here, of course, is understood in terms of the Greek *alētheia*, which has a rich history stretching back to Homer, where it appeared most often in contexts in which one person requests the truth from another about an event of particular concern.¹² The *Phaedo*, which is performed precisely as such an articulation of *alētheia*, must be heard then not only as a dialogue that raises the question of truth but also as one that enacts a certain

⁷ *Phaedo*, 118a5–6.

⁸ *Phaedo*, 118a12.

⁹ For a discussion with Walter Brogan on the problem of remembering in the dialogues and the complex dynamics associated with Plato’s attempts to remember the life of Socrates, listen to Long, Christopher P., “Digital Dialogue 42: Remembering” (http://www.cplong.org/digitaldialogue/digital_dialogue_42_remembering/).

¹⁰ Douglas Stewart points out that the entire *mise-en-scène* of the *Phaedo* is that of a τελετή, or an initiation into the mysteries, and specifically those mysteries associated with the Orphics. He reads the covering of Socrates’ head at the end “not as a romantic gesture of sorrow, for that would contradict the statement (58e) that he died happy – it is pure ritual.” See Stewart, “Socrates’ Last Bath,” 253 and 258. The word is used also in the *Phaedrus* at 237a, when Socrates covers his head to give his first speech to Phaedrus, one that requires a later palinode. The point here, however, is not to deny the ritual dimensions of the text but to emphasize also the extent to which these important details weave the question of ἀλήθεια into the text.

¹¹ *Phaedo*, 57a5–6.

¹² For a discussion of this more original meaning of ἀλήθεια, see Boeder, “Der Frühgriechische Wortgebrauch von Logos Und Aletheia,” 95. See too, Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, 26–33.

response. Indeed, the final words of Socrates, which enjoin a plural “you” not to be careless, find a kind of response in the testimony Phaedo gives to Echecrates, an account that begins with the word “*Autos*,” “self,” and ends with word “*dikaioiatou*,” “the most just.”¹³ The entire dialogue can thus be read as an attempt to uncover and preserve the truth of the death of Socrates, a truth, however, that requires, as Socrates himself insists, a certain way of life. Thus when Crito asks Socrates toward the end of the dialogue if there is any favor they could do for him, he replies: “By caring for yourselves (*humōn autōn epimeloumenoi*), you will be doing whatever you do as a favor to me and to mine and to yourselves . . .;” and he goes on to insist that such care requires a willingness “to live in the footsteps (*ichnos*) of the things said now and in the time before.”¹⁴

If, as Socrates suggests in the *Gorgias*, politics is the art of caring for the soul, then the *Phaedo* must be heard as Plato’s most eloquent political dialogue.¹⁵ Its eloquence, however, is not heard in the political theories it sets forth or in the dogma it allegedly establishes, but in the way the poignant things Socrates says to and with his friends on the last day of his life are woven together into a written recollection that requires those who enter into dialogue with it not merely to reflect on, but also to act differently in the footsteps of the words encountered there.¹⁶ Thus, to discern the eloquence of the *Phaedo as a political dialogue*, the

¹³ Strauss mentions that the first word of the dialogue refers not to the disembodied soul but to the individual embodied soul. See Strauss, *The Argument and the Action of Plato’s Laws*, 75. Burger and Stern reaffirm the way the first work of the dialogue emphasizes the importance of the individual embodied soul in the dialogue. See Burger, *Phaedo A Platonic Labyrinth*, 15–6. Stern, *Socratic Rationalism and Political Philosophy*, 16.

¹⁴ *Phaedo*, 115b5–7.

¹⁵ In his discussion with Polus, Socrates identifies politics as the “art concerning the soul,” and, more specifically, as an art that, directed always toward the best, takes care of the soul. *Gorgias*, 464b3–4, c3–5, and 503a. For a discussion of this, see Long, “Attempting the Political Art” and Chapter 3. Significantly, in the *Apology*, Socrates describes his practice of philosophy as caring for the best possible state of the souls of those he encounters. See *Apology*, 29e1–3, 30a9–b4. See also Chapter 5.

¹⁶ Hackforth fails to recognize the political dimensions of the text insofar as he associates politics with political institutions. He says, “For the *Phaedo* is notably silent regarding political institutions and government; its ethics are wholly individualistic: every man is to be concerned with his own spiritual welfare . . .” He goes on, in attempting to date the dialogue, to insist that there is a “total absence of any social or political reference” in the dialogue. See Hackforth, *Plato’s Phaedo*, 7. Hackforth does, however, come close to identifying the political dimension of the *Phaedo* when he insists that the central teaching of Socrates is that human beings should concern themselves with tending to their souls (*ibid.*, 3). Socratic politics is the care of the soul and as such it elides the individual/common

difference between the topology of Socratic politics and the topography of Platonic politics must be maintained even if they can never be strictly separated.¹⁷ This difference is discernible in the distinction between the last word Socrates speaks and the last written words of the dialogue; for the last words of Socrates, enjoining, as they do, those present not to be careless, point to the very site of Socratic politics as the art of caring for the soul. His final words indicate the very *topos* of the Socratic political *logos* – its topology. The last written words of the text, pointing, as they do, to the figure of a Socrates remembered and framing the dialogue as a whole in terms of justice and the self, demarcate the very *topos* of Platonic political writing – its topography. This difference between topological and topographical politics is, in fact, written into the very structure of the dialogue itself. As narrated by Phaedo in response to a request from a friend, the distance between the living presence of Socrates and his memory haunts the text in such a way that no one who encounters it is permitted to forget that dimension of forgetting endemic to *alētheia*.¹⁸

The dialogue must thus be heard as a performed enactment of *alētheia* articulated along two interconnected paths. The topological path traces how the things Socrates said, or is said to have said, does things to and with those present there with him on his final day; Kebes and Simmias mark this route. The topographical path traces how the things Plato wrote do things to and with those entering into hermeneutical dialogue with the text; Echecrates, simulacrum of the reader, gestures to the contours of this path. If Benardete is right that the dialogue is structured

distinction because it recognizes the degree to which the care of individual souls is bound up decisively with the care of the common whole. The political dimensions of the *Phaedo* can be not only heard in the things Socrates says to those present but also felt in the manner in which they come to understand themselves as part of a philosophical community.

¹⁷ For a discussion with Sara Brill on the political nature of the *Phaedo*, listen to Long, Christopher P., “Digital Dialogue 52: Politics and the *Phaedo*” (http://www.cplong.org/digitaldialogue/digital_dialogue_52_politics_and_the_phaedo/).

¹⁸ The connection between the saying of truth and forgetting is discernible in the etymological connection between ἀλήθεια and λήθειν, which is an older form of λανθάνειν, which means to escape notice or to be forgotten. See Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, 26. One of the five rivers of the underworld in Greek mythology is, of course, Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. Burnet’s suggestion that the conversation between Phaedo and Echecrates is already underway reinforces the degree to which the entire dialogue is conditioned by human finitude and the ongoing attempts to speak the truth about Socrates in the wake of his death. See Burnet, *Plato’s Phaedo*, 57.

in a way that turns the interlocutors in the dialogue into readers of the Platonic dialogues because it forces them to recognize that the argument and the situation belong together, then the narrative structure of the text might be taken to turn us readers of the dialogue into interlocutors in dialogue with Phaedo and Echecrates.¹⁹ In the *Phaedo*, the topological and the topographical paths come together in the figure of Phaedo, for whom the dialogue is named. He is narrator and participant at once, storyteller and reporter. Thus Phaedo is the thread by which we might come to understand the topology of Socratic politics and the topography of Platonic politics as two dimensions of a political philosophy rooted in the recognition that words, both written and spoken, have the power to transform the nature of human community.²⁰

The contours of this political philosophy first become discernible by following a distinct thread in the things Phaedo “attempts to go through” in response to Echecrates’ earnest request to hear the things Socrates said before his death.²¹ As a response to this request, the dialogue performs *alētheia* in its most ancient, Homeric sense. And yet, the words by which Echecrates makes his request suggest a desire for a level of clarity and precision no words from Phaedo in response could deliver. After emphasizing that he and his colleagues in Phlia had heard a report that conveyed only the skeletal details – that Socrates drank the poison and died – but made nothing else sure (*saphes*), Echecrates asks Phaedo: “put your heart into giving us as sure as possible (*hōs saphestata*) a report concerning all these things.”²² To this Phaedo replies, “I will try (*peirasomai*) to go through it for you.” And although Echecrates seems to recognize Phaedo’s account precisely *as an attempt*, he nevertheless insists again on

¹⁹ Benardete, Burger, and Davis, *The Argument of the Action*, 293n2.

²⁰ Jacob Klein has suggested: “... the thread of Phaedo’s narrative in the dialogue goes through a labyrinth of questions and arguments. Can we fail to see that Phaedo corresponds to Ariadne in the ancient tale?” See Klein, *Lectures and Essays*, 377.

²¹ *Phaedo*, 57a5.

²² The first appearance of *σαφές* occurs at *Phaedo*, 57b1; the passage cited directly appears at *Phaedo*, 58d2–3. Translators are at odds regarding precisely how to render “*σαφές*” here and throughout the text. Gallop says “definite” here and “certain” elsewhere. See Gallop, *Phaedo*. Rowe suggests that it means “clear.” See Rowe, *Plato Phaedo*, 108, 124. Burnet, however, insists that it does not mean “clear,” but rather “sure” and “trustworthy.” Burnet, *Plato’s Phaedo*, 2. Brann, Kalkavage, and Salem consistently translate it as “sure,” a practice followed here if only to connect the term in English with a concern for assurance. See Brann, Kalkavage, and Salem, *Plato*.

precision: “But try to go through everything as precisely as you can (*hōs an dunēi akribestata*).”²³ Here the thread that may guide us through the labyrinth that is the *Phaedo* to its central political teachings is discernible; for in the space that opens between Echecrates’ desire for clarity and precision and *Phaedo*’s attempt to put the last day of Socrates into words there emerges an articulation of the truth in which we are made to feel the full weight of the finitude that conditions all human being with one another in the world. And as the weight of these written words presses us, as readers, to reconsider the course of our lives and the ways we live with one another conditioned by finitude, we are made to experience something of what Socrates sought to cultivate in and with those present on the day the ship from Delos returned to Athens. Plato’s poetic politics thus does with us precisely what Socrates sought to do with each individual he encountered. In order, then, to discern how the topology of Socratic politics is bound intimately up with the topography of Platonic politics, it will be necessary to follow the thread of this tension between the demand for certainty and the attempt to articulate the truth as it plays out in the things said by Socrates to Kebes and Simmias; for his attempt to cultivate in them a healthy erotic relationship toward the truth in the face of death must also be heard as an eloquent and insistent attempt to cultivate the same in us.

THE TOPOLOGY OF SOCRATIC POLITICS: KEBES AND SIMMIAS

The topology of Socratic politics can be charted by attending to how the things Socrates says to Kebes and Simmias cultivate in them, to differing degrees, an erotic relationship with truth and justice that enjoins an ongoing attempt to put words into practice with a view to what is in itself beautiful and good. The various arguments concerning the immortality of the soul are central to the dialogue precisely insofar as they fail to be conclusive and so force those sincerely engaged with the things said in the dialogue to face the concrete realities of finitude.²⁴ What

²³ *Phaedo*, 58d4–5 and 58d8–9.

²⁴ Gadamer recognizes this when he writes: “As convincing as the discussion might have been, the conclusion is drawn that the proofs are not sufficient and that one must continue to test

Socrates seeks to teach Kebes and Simmias in taking them through these accounts is a certain habit of thinking and living in relation to death. Each of them embodies a different set of values and concerns, that, when brought together as Socrates does in the end, are shown to be integral to the attempt to put philosophy into concrete political practice, that is, to live a philosophical life. Kebes is captivated by a certain conception of truth – indeed, by a conception of truth as certainty. This captivation places demands on Socrates he is unable to meet, and yet these demands animate the discussion and hold it accountable to the highest truth possible for human beings. Simmias, for his part, shows himself to be concerned with justice and thus is better able than anyone aside from Socrates himself to develop an attitude toward human finitude that is healthy and thus able to open new possibilities of human community. Simmias demonstrates the capacity for dialogical poetics Protagoras showed himself lacking: a certain courage to speak in his own voice and a willingness to listen in turn. This dialogical ability is precisely what enables Socrates to establish a community among those gathered rooted in a healthy erotic relationship to truth and justice – a relationship healthy enough for Socrates to have deemed it appropriate to sacrifice a rooster to Asclepius.²⁵

The question of truth as *alētheia* is explicitly raised for the first time in the dialogue by Socrates in his initial response to Kebes, who is at a loss as to what to tell the poet Evenus about why Socrates has, in his final days, taken up composing poetry.²⁶ “Tell him the truth, Kebes (*Legetoimun . . . auto, ō Kebēs, t’alēthē*),” Socrates responds as he goes on to explain his desire to put certain recurring dreams he has had to the test.²⁷ These dreams enjoined him to “make music and practice it (*ergazou*),” and Socrates had always interpreted them as exhortations to do philosophy, which he considered the “the greatest music.”²⁸ Now, however, caught between the trial that condemned him and the festival

their premises insofar as humanly possible.” See Gadamer, “The Proofs of Immortality in Plato’s *Phaedo*,” 36.

²⁵ For a discussion of the erotic nature of politics with Jill Gordon, see Long, Christopher P., “Digital Dialogue 09: Erotic Politics” (http://www.cplong.org/digitaldialogue/digital_dialogue_09_erotic_politics/).

²⁶ Allen astutely notes that the Greek does not turn Socrates into a writer; rather, he “composes” poetry. The Greek is “ποιεῖν,” not “γράφειν.” See Allen, *Why Plato Wrote*, 16.

²⁷ *Phaedo*, 60d8–9.

²⁸ *Phaedo*, 60e1–61a4.

to Apollo that prevents his death, Socrates tells of how he has reconsidered his previous position, thinking perhaps that the god ordered him to make “demotic music.”²⁹ Already here in his first response to Kebes, Socrates demonstrates a willingness to call even his deepest convictions, the very convictions for which he was condemned to die, into question. It seems, then, that the truth Kebes is enjoined to speak to Evenus must involve this abiding willingness to reconsider the guiding principles of one’s life. This truth, however, is performed as much as it is spoken by Socrates in such a way that, reading the text, we are made aware of a set of themes that are likely to have escaped the notice of the interlocutors. Here we may already discern something of the nature of the Platonic art of political writing, for by showing Socrates so radically at odds with himself, writing and making music for the people, the connection between Socrates and the city is obliquely inserted into the text. As Seth Benardete has suggested, when the city suspends its own activity, as it does during the time the ship sent to Delos is away, Socrates becomes willing to suspend his own activity of philosophy. This opens the space in which the very relationship between philosophy and politics might be reconsidered. But by having Socrates and Athens meet, as Benardete so poignantly puts it, in the realm of poetry and myth, Plato also invites us to think about the nature of political *writing* and the possibility, indeed, that such writing might need to take the form of a kind of storytelling, or *muthologia*.³⁰

The story Phaedo tells begins, indeed, with Socrates claiming that it is fitting for him, facing death, “to examine and indeed tell stories (*diaskopein te kai muthologeîn*) concerning the emigration There – what sort of thing we think it is.”³¹ The things Socrates says are designed to provoke Kebes and Simmias to reconsider their lives as conditioned by death. For Kebes this means coming to terms with uncertainty; for Simmias it means positing a hypothesis that will allow him to navigate life despite the recognized limits of human understanding. The path by which these two Pythagoreans cultivate a healthy relationship toward death lead

²⁹ *Phaedo*, 61a7.

³⁰ Benardete, Burger, and Davis, *The Argument of the Action*, 280–1.

³¹ *Phaedo*, 61e1–3.

to the very heart of Socrates' political teaching in the *Phaedo*, a teaching that is at once articulated and performed as a kind of "second sailing."

THE PATH OF CERTAINTY: KEBES

This path, a first sailing, begins with Kebes requesting something sure, *saphes*, from the things Socrates has heard from Philolaus concerning the contradiction Socrates has provocatively set forth by suggesting that Evenus should follow him quickly into death, although he should perhaps not do violence to himself.³² Kebes' request for something sure uncovers his dispositional concern for certainty, which is marked throughout the text by his repeated articulation of "*pantapasin*," an adverb that points to what is entirely and altogether certain.³³ It is, however, significant that the request for surety occurs here in relation to things heard. The concern for certainty is thus situated firmly in the world of human hearsay and conditioned by a concern for the proper response to contingent existence even as it is thereby also made to resonate with the most ancient experience of *alētheia*, which has always been bound to ways of saying that reveal the nature of things seen and heard.

Socrates, in fact, anticipates the trajectory of the discussion in his immediate response to Kebes when he says "[b]ut it is necessary to take heart, for maybe you will hear [something *saphes*]. However, perhaps it will appear wondrous to you, if this alone of all the others is simple . . ."³⁴ Although Socrates is speaking specifically here about the tension between the prohibition on suicide and philosophy as the practice of dying, what Kebes in fact will hear as sure, indeed, the only thing in the dialogue Socrates explicitly identifies as "*saphes*," is death. This Socrates says at a decisive point in the story he tells about becoming,

³² *Phaedo*, 61c8–10.

³³ It seems that "*παντάπασιν*" is a response beloved by Kebes. See 72d5, 79a5, 79d10, 81a3, 88b8 where the soul must be shown to be "entirely (*παντάπασιν*) deathless and imperishable," 89d6, and 103a3. In the end Kebes is totally convinced by Socrates' response to his objection that the soul may not be immortal, but only long lasting, 107a1–2: he "in no way distrusts" the λόγος.

³⁴ *Phaedo*, 62a1–3. Rowe suggests that ἀπλοῦν here means "true without qualification." See Rowe, *Plato's Phaedo*, 127.

contraries, and the immortality of the soul as he establishes death as contrary to life, a discussion he pursues, appropriately, with Kebes.³⁵ Having himself established being asleep and being awake as contraries that come into being from one another, Socrates invites Kebes to tell him how it stands with being dead and being alive. Once Kebes had set being alive and being dead up as contraries and agreed that the dead thing comes to be from that which is living and the living comes to be from the dead, Socrates inserts a gentle reminder that they are not talking abstractly about things, but “living people too (*ta zōnta te kai hoi zōntes*).”³⁶ He then says this: “Doesn’t then one of the two becomings happen to be sure (*saphēs*)? Presumably dying is sure, isn’t it? (*to gar apothnēiskein saphes dēpou, ē ou;*)” To which Kebes responds “*Panu men oun*” – “Entirely indeed.”³⁷

What appears as a brief moment in the discussion of becoming, contraries, and the immortality of the soul takes on significance on both a topographical and a topological level. Topographically, the gesture to the concrete human situation and the understated manner in which the question is formulated uncover Socrates’ calmness in the face of death as he tells Kebes the story from contraries about the immortality of the soul. Topologically, however, they mark an important pedagogical attempt to cultivate in Kebes a healthy relationship toward death by subtly insisting that one of the two becomings – namely that death becomes from life – is *saphes*. The repetition of the term “*saphes*” here underscores the existential certainty of death, which stands opposed to

³⁵ When he introduces what is commonly referred to as the “argument of opposites,” “reciprocity argument” (Dorter), or indeed, “Plato’s Cyclical Argument” (Wolfe), Socrates speaks not of an argument or “λόγος,” but he says, “let us tell a more thorough story (διαμυθῶμεν)” (70b6). Sallis recognizes the importance of Socrates’ taking on the role of storyteller. See Sallis, “Φρονήσις in Hades and Beyond,” 127. For the “argument of opposites,” see Davis, “Socrates’ Pre-Socratism: Some Remarks on the Structure of Plato’s *Phaedo*,” 567–8. For “reciprocity argument,” see Dorter, “The Reciprocity Argument and the Structure of Plato’s *Phaedo*.” For the “Cyclical Argument,” see Wolfe, “Plato’s Cyclical Argument for Immortality.”

³⁶ *Phaedo*, 71d14–5.

³⁷ *Phaedo*, 71e5–7. In the context of the story concerning contraries, this moment marks an important turning point pedagogically, for Socrates had carefully presented the manner in which sleeping and waking come to be from one another, but he leaves it to Kebes to speak in a similar way about life and death. However unconvincing the story is, its significance in the education of Kebes, and specifically in encouraging him to face death as the only thing that really is *σαφές*, should not be underestimated.

the epistemological certainty Kebes seems to seek. After laying out the structure of how contraries come into being from one another with regard to waking and sleeping, Socrates seems intent on having Kebes himself speak about the “yoked pair” of life and death. The reminder toward the end that they are speaking not in abstractions, but about people too, renders the story poignant and concrete. Kebes is, for now at least, more eager to be convinced by the story than he is to criticize it.³⁸ Thus, when Socrates draws the story to a close, Kebes not only affirms to Socrates that “you seem to me to say what is altogether true (*alla moi dokeis pantapasin alēthē legein*),” but he is also quick to add to it another account that proves the immortality of the soul – that of recollection – which he calls a “most beautiful account (*hēni men logō . . . kallistōi*).”³⁹ For Kebes, its beauty seems to lie in the sort of knowledge it demonstrates; for when humans are beautifully questioned, they are able to “tell everything as it is;” and they would not be able to do this if “knowledge and the correct account (*episteme . . . orthos logos*)” were not already in them. Kebes goes on to emphasize that the “surest indication (*saphestata katēgorei*)” of this occurs when you question them about “mathematical diagrams or other things of that sort.”⁴⁰ Kebes’ own sense of beauty is determined by what is surest, most complete, and certain.

That something more incomplete and less certain might be at stake here, however, is suggested by the comical interjection of Simmias into the transition between the story of the contraries and the beautiful account of recollection. The moment Kebes introduces the *logos* of recollection with such enthusiasm, Simmias interjects: “Kebes, what sorts of demonstrations were there for these things? Remind me, for I can’t remember very well at present.”⁴¹ This moment of comedy recalls us to the present moment and reminds us of our human frailties and embodiment. But Simmias’ little joke also testifies to something important about his character, his friendship with Kebes, and why precisely

³⁸ Dorter suggests that the argument is “deliberately misleading” so as to persuade those least philosophically disposed toward death. See Dorter, “The Reciprocity Argument and the Structure of Plato’s *Phaedo*,” 6. Dorter recognizes that neither Kebes nor Simmias is deceived, for at 77b–c, they indicate that they do not think the soul’s survival after death has been proven.

³⁹ *Phaedo*, 73a7.

⁴⁰ *Phaedo*, 73a8–b2.

⁴¹ *Phaedo*, 73a4–7.

these two young men are the most appropriate interlocutors for Socrates on his final day. The joke demonstrates a love of *logoi*, a playfulness of spirit, and an abiding comfort with one's own finitude. The joke illustrates something of the nature of the friendship between Simmias and Kebes, a friendship that seems to deepen in the course of the dialogue; for despite his intense desire for certainty, Kebes shares with Simmias a rich skepticism, a tenacious willingness to pursue the truth, and, perhaps most importantly, the ability to laugh. These characteristics make Kebes and Simmias two of the most philosophically disposed interlocutors to be found in the dialogues.

In order to better discern the nature of their friendship and the philosophical community Socrates is able to establish on its basis, it will be necessary to attend to Simmias, who enriches the dialogue by adding to the intense interest in certainty we find in Kebes, a deep concern for justice. Indeed, the difference between these two friends is the very basis for the philosophical community Socrates establishes in the dialogue; for by combining Kebes' tenacious desire for the surest knowledge possible with Simmias' courageous willingness to speak with a sense for justice, Socrates performs the central political act of the dialogue: to create a community of friends animated by a healthy erotic relationship to truth in the wake of the ineluctable finitude that conditions all human life. And what is most remarkable, what gives the text its political power, is the eloquence with which it shows Socrates founding this community even as he faces his own finitude in the most concrete way imaginable. The poetics of Platonic politics is thus rooted in the topology of Socratic politics.

THE PATH OF JUSTICE: SIMMIAS

If Kebes is provoked by the inconsistencies he heard in Socrates' instructions to Evenus to follow him quickly in death, but without doing violence to himself, Simmias is moved by the concrete injustice of the suggestion. After Socrates praises Kebes for his ability to "search out *logoi*" and for his unwillingness to be immediately persuaded – virtues endemic to a philosophical disposition – Simmias inserts himself into the discussion by asserting that Kebes is "aiming his argument at

you, for you bear up so easily leaving us”⁴² To this, Socrates responds: “you [two] say just things (*Dikaia . . . legete*)” and, deploying the language of the courts, he suggests that he should offer a defense (*apologyēsasthai*) against these charges.⁴³ This response not only connects the *Phaedo* yet more intimately with the *Apology*, but, by addressing himself to both of them – for he uses the second person plural – Socrates already implicitly draws Kebes’ desire for surety into relation with Simmias’ demand for justice. In holding Socrates accountable on this most human level – how can you so calmly leave us?! – Simmias enjoins Socrates to give an account of the very activity of philosophy. He does this by insisting that Socrates share with them his reasons for hoping good things will happen to good people after death. Simmias puts it poignantly: “This good seems to me to be common to us.”⁴⁴ The good, however, to which Socrates gestures and which Simmias so incisively recognizes as common to them turns out to be the erotic activity of philosophy understood as the “caring practice of dying (*apothnēiskein meletōsi*).”⁴⁵

The defense Socrates offers of philosophy as the practice of dying here at the beginning, however, is so rife with Pythagorean and Orphic tropes of purification, mystery, and myth that those attending to the things said are made at once to feel both the allure of the vision and the elusiveness of its truth. Socrates introduces the Pythagorean-Orphic practice of purification, *katharsis*, not as an ultimate condemnation of the body, but as an attempt to cultivate, *as far as possible*, a life erotically oriented toward moderation, justice, courage, and thoughtfulness; these are the excellences, ethical and intellectual, endemic to the practice of

⁴² *Phaedo*, 63a7–9.

⁴³ *Phaedo*, 63b1–2. The *Phaedo* is dramatically connected with the *Apology* in obvious ways, but here it becomes explicit. Hackforth rightly identifies this as Socrates’ “second apology.” See Hackforth, *Plato’s Phaedo*, 57.

⁴⁴ *Phaedo*, 63d1. This translation does not capture the manner in which the written Greek emphasizes the notion of the common: “κοινὸν γὰρ δὴ ἔμοιγε δοκεῖ καὶ ἡμῖν εἶναι ἀγαθὸν τοῦτο” Beginning with “κοινόν,” the very word order of the sentence emphasizes the idea of the common. Rowe suggests further that “δὴ stresses κοινόν, as καὶ does ἡμῖν.” See Rowe, *Plato Phaedo*, 133. The way Plato puts these words into Simmias’ mouth articulate the importance of what is common to those present, that is, of their community. These words written in this way place emphasis on the very manner in which those gathered there are together.

⁴⁵ *Phaedo*, 67e4–5.

philosophy.⁴⁶ The defense Socrates offers, in fact, introduces, for the first time in the dialogue, the ideas – first “some Just Itself” and then also “some Beautiful and Good” – as erotic principles inaccessible to our embodied selves but discernible to the soul insofar as it has purified itself as much as possible.⁴⁷ That Justice Itself appears here first and in conversation with Simmias reinforces the notion that justice is his main concern and that Socrates, recognizing this, appeals to it in order to draw Simmias himself toward the erotic practices of philosophy. The defense itself returns again and again to the theme of eros, characterizing those who philosophize rightly as “in love with thoughtfulness (*ērōn de phronēseōs*).”⁴⁸ Indeed, just as Orpheus himself, who so loved Eurydice in life that he pursued her into Hades, the philosopher has similarly loved thoughtfulness in life to pursue it There.⁴⁹ Yet in the very

⁴⁶ Socrates thus calls these excellences “nothing but a kind of purifier (*καθαυμός τις*)” at 69c2–3. The theme of purification ought not to be heard as an outright rejection of embodied existence. As Madison has suggested, the appeal to purification would have resonated with the Pythagorean circle, but at a different level it is designed to draw a contrast between two different ways of life. See Madison, “Have We Been Careless with Socrates’ Last Words?,” 428. Socrates himself is careful to qualify his claims about the possibility of separating the soul from the body. For example, he says, “And during the time we are alive, this, it seems, is how we will come as close as possible to knowing: if, as much as possible, we neither associate nor commune with the body, unless it is absolutely necessary . . .” (67a2–4). Here and elsewhere, there are things Socrates says and does that indicate that he did not himself embrace the Pythagorean-Orphic themes of asceticism, transmigration of souls, practiced catharsis, and hatred of the body articulated in this defense. Speaking of a set of “Pythagorean-Orphic” themes and tropes is necessitated by the inherently speculative nature of these most ancient of figures and traditions. See Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, 149.

⁴⁷ *Phaedo*, 65d4–7.

⁴⁸ *Phaedo*, 68a2.

⁴⁹ *Phaedo*, 68a3–b6. John Sallis has emphasized the way this passage references the Orpheus myth, and indeed, that of Odysseus. He argues convincingly that these myths reinforce the elusive nature of what is sought in Hades. See Sallis, “Φρονησις in Hades and Beyond,” 125–6. There Sallis suggests that Odysseus is able to interact with the shades but remained unable to embrace them. The story of Orpheus, like much else about him, is ambiguous. Stories of his descent into the underworld extend as far back as his legend has existed, as does the notion that he sought there a soul to bring back to life. That it was his wife he sought seems to be a slightly later addition. See Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, 29–30. Further, whether he was successful or not seems too to have changed over time. His failure is most poignantly articulated by Virgil, in the *Fourth Georgic* when “a sudden madness swept through the incautious lover, / forgivable . . .” See Virgil and Lembke, *Georgics*, 4.488–9, 76. In the *Alcestis*, Euripides has Admetus suggest that Orpheus was successful. See Grene and Lattimore, *Euripides I: Alcestis, The Medea, The Heracleidae, Hippolytus*, 357–62. In the *Symposium*, however, Plato has Phaedrus tell how Orpheus was unsuccessful (*ἀτελής*) in his mission to bring back the shade of his unnamed wife. See *Symposium*,

process of insisting, as he does repeatedly, that only There, in Hades, will the philosopher “encounter thoughtfulness purely (*katharōs*)” and “know for sure (*saphes*),” Socrates implicitly emphasizes the elusive nature of ideals like the Just, the Beautiful, and the Good in this life.⁵⁰ Yet despite this elusiveness, indeed, in full cognizance of it, the philosophical life *is lived*.⁵¹ The life of Socrates itself is eloquent testimony to this. But further testimony can be heard in the defense Socrates offers here to Simmias and Kebes, which itself uncovers the manner in which the activity of philosophy is also deeply political, for it is pursued not in isolation but in dialogue with others. This is revealed not simply by what Socrates says here but in the way it is said to Simmias and Kebes, for it is designed – in appealing to Justice Itself and in articulating the love of truth in terms of a desire for that which is sure (*saphes*) – to appeal to the deepest concerns of each in an attempt to cultivate in them together a proper orientation toward the Just, the Beautiful, and the Good as erotic ideals, at once alluring and ungraspable, that might serve as the animating principles of their ongoing lives together.

It is then proper that what began with Simmias ends with Kebes; for the defense prompted by Simmias for what seemed to him to be Socrates’ inhumane calm in abandoning his friends ends with Kebes affirming the beauty of the things said even as he insists that “what you said about the soul produces much distrust in human-beings, for they fear lest the soul, whenever she is released from the body, is no longer anywhere and is destroyed and perishes on the day when the human-being dies.”⁵² Although he speaks here of “human-beings” in general, the comment discloses two further dimensions of the human being Kebes himself. First, he is not quick to place his trust in beautiful *logoi*. Socrates had, in fact, already praised him for this when, hearing

197d2–e1. For a discussion of these differences, see Robbins, “Famous Orpheus,” 14–8. If we attend simply to the Platonic version, it seems fair to say that the reference to Orpheus reinforces the elusive nature of what is sought in Hades, for according to Phaedrus, Orpheus was unsuccessful.

⁵⁰ See *Phaedo*, 68b4 and 69d5–6. The human incapacity to see the truth is emphasized also at 66d6–7.

⁵¹ Bolotin puts this nicely when he writes, “And it is above all . . . because philosophy thus incorporates an acceptance of the necessity of death that Socrates characterizes it as the practice of dying and being dead.” See Bolotin, “The Life of Philosophy and the Immortality of the Soul,” 55.

⁵² *Phaedo*, 69e7–70a4.

his argument for why precisely thoughtful people *should* make a fuss about death, Socrates was impressed by Kebes for his “unwillingness to be persuaded right off by what anyone says.” Indeed, Phaedo had just editorialized that Socrates “seemed to me to be pleased by the diligence of Kebes.”⁵³ This very diligence and Kebes’ distrust of arguments seems not only to be what sets the dialogue on its way along the path that considers the immortality of the soul, but it is also the basis of his friendship with Simmias – a fact that does not seem to have escaped the notice of Socrates. Having gone through the story of the contraries and the beautiful account of recollection and upon hearing Simmias affirm that the soul exists prior to birth, Socrates asks Simmias if Kebes is persuaded. Simmias playfully responds that Kebes is the “mightiest of human-beings when it comes to distrusting *logoi*.”⁵⁴ The question prompts Simmias himself to imagine his friend’s objection – namely, that the soul’s existence prior to birth does not prove its existence after death. Kebes agrees, presses the point, helping navigate the dialogue toward its deepest political teachings, which are found in its very center.

Here too, however, the second dimension of Kebes’ character revealed at the end of Socrates’ defense is reaffirmed, namely, that what drives his desire for certainty is not an erotic love of the truth but a certain childish fear. Socrates addresses the point directly, and Kebes is playful enough to respond in a way conducive to his own education – he laughs. Socrates insists that he and Simmias “have the fear of children lest, as she departs from the body, the wind will truly blow away and disperse the soul.”⁵⁵ Kebes laughs at this, and he goes on to admit that “perhaps even in us there is some child who fears such things.” This moment of playful candor allows Socrates to suggest with equal playfulness and candor, “What you should do is to sing to him each day until you charm away his fears.”⁵⁶ When Kebes, picking up a line of concern from Simmias, then asks Socrates where they will find another good singer “since you now

⁵³ *Phaedo*, 62e8–63a3. This diligence, which translates the Greek “παραματεία,” is heard again in the dialogue, but there with reference to the manner in which Socrates took up the “second sailing.” Cf. 99d1. Kebes and Socrates are connected by a shared capacity for diligence.

⁵⁴ *Phaedo*, 77a8–9.

⁵⁵ *Phaedo*, 77d7–e1.

⁵⁶ *Phaedo*, 77e5–9.

are abandoning us?,"⁵⁷ Socrates directs them to track such a singer down in all of Greece and in the many tribes of foreigners – but then he surmises that “perhaps you would not easily find someone more able to do this than yourselves.”⁵⁸ Socrates here turns the attention of those present to the community gathered there, implicitly encouraging them to become singers themselves and to care for the community once he is no longer with them. Indeed, with this reference to a certain singing, practiced “each day,” Socrates calls their attention to his own philosophical practice, which itself turns out to be a deeply political activity, for it attempts to cultivate in each person encountered a healthy erotic relationship to truth in light of human finitude.⁵⁹ The possibility of a genuine transformation of the present human political community is rooted in the ability to cultivate such a healthy erotic relationship to the truth. But to charm away the fear of death involves neither a retreat into delusional dogmatism nor an abandonment of the attempt to articulate the truth. Rather, it involves recognizing the limits of human understanding endemic to finite existence and, on the basis of that recognition, attempting nevertheless to press our relationships with one another toward the ideals of Justice, Beauty, and the Good – however elusive they ultimately remain. Gadamer suggests precisely how the fear factors into what might now be considered the politics of finite transcendence when he writes, “The fear of death which is never quite to be put to rest is in fact correlative to our having to think beyond the surrounding world given to us in sense experience and beyond our own finite existence.”⁶⁰ If philosophy is the caring practice of dying, perhaps it is rooted ultimately in the capacity to transform the irreducible fear of death into an indefatigable willingness

⁵⁷ *Phaedo*, 78a1–2. This passage is connected to Simmias’ initial concern at 63a9 concerning how Socrates can so calmly abandon them by the use of the word ἀπολείπειν, to leave or abandon, in both contexts. Here Platonic writing invites us to connect the childish fear not merely with Kebes’ desire for certainty but also with Simmias’ concern for justice.

⁵⁸ *Phaedo*, 78a3–9. Gadamer has rightly emphasized that Socrates’ suggestion that they go beyond the community of Greeks indicates that their common endeavor transcends the community of a language. See Gadamer, “The Proofs of Immortality in Plato’s *Phaedo*,” 37. This suggestion also, however, invites Simmias and Kebes to consider the wider whole of which they are a part.

⁵⁹ For a discussion of how Socratic political music plays itself out with Glaucon in the *Republic*, see Long, “Socrates and the Politics of Music: Preludes of the *Republic*.”

⁶⁰ Gadamer, “The Proofs of Immortality in Plato’s *Phaedo*,” 36–7. The idea of finite transcendence as characteristic of Platonic philosophy is developed in great detail by Hyland, *Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues*.

to stretch beyond the concrete realities of existing relationships toward ideals that might make those relationship more just, more beautiful, and better.⁶¹

A middle way between delusional dogmatism and the complete abandonment of truth is identified by Simmias, whose courage, sense of justice, and, perhaps most importantly, desire to say in the moment the things that need to be said empower him to introduce into the dialogue the very themes Socrates himself will take up in earnest as he describes the course of his own life. The beginning of the decisive middle section of the dialogue is marked by a long silence that descends on those gathered in the prison cell with Socrates. It happens in the wake of yet another attempt by Socrates to charm away the fears of Simmias and Kebes by articulating the manner in which the true lover of learning and philosophy will turn away from the pleasures and desires of the body as much as possible and allow the care of the soul to animate the course of life.⁶² But Simmias and Kebes are unable to remain silent; they continue a dialogue with one another in low voices. After a long time, Socrates turns to them and asks if there is something lacking in the things said previously. Simmias risks speaking a truth that brings the dialogue to its central crisis. He begins this way: “To speak the truth, Socrates, for a long time now each of us has been perplexed and each of us pushed and urged the other to ask, for we had the desire to hear, but we hesitated to give trouble, for fear that it might be unpleasant for you in your present misfortune.”⁶³ Simmias has the courage to speak the truth and the ethical imagination to understand its unsettling power. Socrates, however, responds with a “gentle laugh” and the beautiful analogy between the song he now sings and the songs of swans, who sing most beautifully in the face of death, not, as many people think, from fear of death, but, according to this Socratic song, in praise of Apollo

⁶¹ Gadamer suggests that death demands a specific kind of human response: “And how indeed should the phenomenon of death in all its immensity ever become comprehensible for human reason and insight, and yet how much even so does it continue to demand from human beings a response to its imponderability.” See Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic?: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, 37. The *Phaedo* is the story of the Socratic response to the imponderability of death. The Socratic response returns us to one another when it could have sought solace in certainty.

⁶² *Phaedo*, 80d–84b.

⁶³ *Phaedo*, 84c4–7.

for the good things they will encounter in Hades.⁶⁴ In so responding, Socrates empowers Simmias to frame the perplexities he and Kebes have in a way that illustrates his own deep recognition of human finitude.⁶⁵ Simmias, more than anyone in the dialogue aside perhaps from Socrates himself, gives voice to the peculiar condition in which human beings find themselves and he charts the path of a possible safe passage.

The things Simmias says here render acute the central crisis around which the entire dialogue is organized, even as they hint at the deeply political response this crisis provokes. Simmias first articulates the situation in which they find themselves, drawing his own sense of things into tight connection with how it might appear to Socrates:

It seems to me, as perhaps it does to you, that on one hand, to know anything sure (*to men saphes eidenai*) concerning these things in the present life is either impossible or something altogether difficult, but indeed, on the other hand, not to test in every way the things said and to leave off investigating before someone speaks them out (*apeipēi*) in every way, is to be an extremely faint-hearted person.⁶⁶

Simmias thus recognizes the impossibility of the sort of certainty Kebes had desired, sure knowledge, but he simultaneously condemns as cowardly the unwillingness to speak the truth of things out in every way. Courage here involves speaking out toward truth even and especially when sure knowledge is recognized as ultimately elusive. Thus, Simmias first gives explicit voice to the very problem Socrates will describe in his autobiographical story. And further, Simmias introduces precisely the solution Socrates will develop in terms of a “second sailing.”

⁶⁴ *Phaedo*, 84d8–85b9.

⁶⁵ *Phaedo* mentions at the beginning that those gathered with Socrates that day sometimes laughed and sometimes cried (59a8–9). It is laughter, however, that seems to connect Kebes, Simmias, and Socrates. Socrates offers his gentle laugh here in response to the truth Simmias has the courage to speak; Kebes laughs when Socrates suggests that he and Simmias have the fear of children because they seem to believe the soul scatters in all directions when someone happens to die (77e4). Sallis has emphasized the frequency of laughter in the dialogue: “The outbursts of laughter, in particular, serve not only to punctuate the discourse, but also to indicate, often in advance, a certain comedic moment belonging to it.” See Sallis, “Φρονησις in Hades and Beyond,” 122. Beyond pointing toward the comedic dimensions of the text, the presence of laughter in the dialogue testifies to the grace with which Socrates and his friends respond to the fear of death.

⁶⁶ *Phaedo*, 85c1–6.

Simmias puts it this way: “Concerning these things it is necessary for one to accomplish (*diapraxasthai*) one of these things: either to learn or to discover how things are, or, if that is impossible, to sail through life (*diapleusai ton bion*), seizing on the best and most difficult to refute human *logoi*, while enduring the dangers as upon a raft.”⁶⁷ Simmias and Kebes are in the process of learning that it is impossible to learn or discover how things are with respect to the immortality of the soul and they will be forced, as Simmias indicates and Socrates accomplishes, to seize instead on the best human account possible in order to sail safely through the rest of their lives. Simmias, for his part, seems already to recognize the human inability to know surely; thus, he is hesitant to speak the truth out with Socrates and those gathered with him on his final day. Yet what lends him the courage to speak out is not only that gentle laugh of Socrates and his explicit invitation to “say and ask whatever you want,”⁶⁸ but perhaps more fundamentally, a certain sense of shame. His, however, is not the shame associated with appearing badly before others, but a shame toward himself. Thus, Simmias speaks as a way of being true to himself – he speaks, that is, in his own voice: “Now I won’t be ashamed to ask questions, for you asked me these things and I will not accuse myself at a later time because I did not say now the things that seem to me to be the case.”⁶⁹ The imperative to speak out what seems to be the case is here both a matter of the gentle, caring response of Socrates and Simmias’ own deep understanding of the importance of being present to the moment, to the current situation, and to those with whom one seeks the truth; for Simmias is acutely aware that he will not have a second chance to say the things that need to be said to Socrates. This courage to speak out, this acute awareness of the constraints time imposes on human beings is what moves the dialogue forward first to the objections Simmias and Kebes have – that the soul might be a kind of tuning and so dependent on the body and that the soul might be more like a weaver’s cloak that outlives many bodies without being immortal – and then to Socrates’ insistence that they not become misologues, and on ultimately to Socrates’ account of

⁶⁷ *Phaedo*, 85c7–d2.

⁶⁸ *Phaedo*, 85b7–8.

⁶⁹ *Phaedo*, 85d4–7.

his own life and the way he sought to navigate the dangers of which Simmias spoke so well.

Although the course of the rest of the dialogue will deepen and develop the central political teaching of the dialogue, here already the main thrust of Socratic politics has been accomplished; for the things Simmias has said, the courage by which he has said them, and the course he himself proposes they take together have demonstrated his ability to care for souls, both his own and those of his friends, in the practice of dying. On the basis of the things Simmias has said, Socrates is able to gather those present into a genuine community rooted in a common erotic endeavor to articulate the truth. Thus, once Simmias speaks out his own concerns with the things said previously, Socrates responds “with a broad stare and, smiling, he said ‘the things Simmias says are, indeed, just’” and he goes on to speak in the first person plural and in decidedly political language about Kebes’ “charge against the *logos*” and how “we may take counsel on what we are to say, and then, having listened, either come together with them if they seem to harmonize, or, if not, to continue to advocate for the *logos*.”⁷⁰ The very language Socrates uses – *enkalein*, to call in, *bouleuein*, to deliberate, *sunchōrein*, to come together or accede, *hyperdikein*, to advocate for – is endemic to a court of law, suggesting indeed that they are engaged in an important political discourse in which justice is at stake. The moment is marked by Socrates’ peculiar broad stare and a smile that seem to further indicate that something distinctively Socratic and pleasant to him had been accomplished by the things they had said together and the community of discourse into which they were entering.⁷¹

THE TOPOGRAPHY OF PLATONIC POLITICS

If, however, the conditions for the establishment of a Socratic political community have largely been set by the middle of the dialogue, the

⁷⁰ *Phaedo*, 86d5–e4. The language Socrates uses – ἐγκαλεῖν, to call in, βουλεύειν, to deliberate, συγχωρεῖν, to come together or accede, ὑπερδikeῖν, to advocate for, – is endemic to a court of law, suggesting indeed that they are engaged in an important political discourse in which justice is at stake.

⁷¹ For a discussion of the interpretation of “Διαβλέψας” as a way of looking distinctive of Socrates, see Burnet, *Plato’s Phaedo*, 84.

interlude situated at the very middle, with its discussion of misology, the second sailing, and the method of hypothesis, indicates the manner in which the topology of Socratic politics is bound intimately up with the topography of Platonic politics. In order to discern this, however, a shift in focus is necessary, for with the explicit reappearance of Echecrates and Phaedo engaged in direct speech with one another, we are invited to reflect on these characters and the influence of the words said by Socrates on them. The topology of Socratic politics extends, indeed, beyond the very life of Socrates by virtue of the practice of Platonic writing. This is felt most poignantly in the things Phaedo says directly to Echecrates about how he was affected by the things Socrates said that day, yet these affections themselves do not remain limited to the characters in this philosophical drama but rather extend through the written text to the reader in hermeneutical dialogue with it. The site of this dialogical encounter is the topography of Platonic politics. To enter into living dialogue with the text is to feel oneself addressed and to allow oneself to be moved by it. Speaking in terms of the intention to understand, Gadamer gives voice also, although perhaps he would not formulate it this way, to the political significance of dialogical hermeneutics. To understand a text, Gadamer suggests,

means that the interpreter's own thoughts have always already gone into re-awakening the sense of the text. In this the horizon of the interpreter is decisive, yet not as a personal standpoint that one maintains and enforces, but more as an opinion and possibility that one brings into play and puts at risk and which helps one truly appropriate what the text says. We have described this above as the fusion of horizons.⁷²

The topography of Platonic politics, then, is the site of a fusion of horizons between reader and text that first opens the possibility not only of understanding but also of cultivating in those with hermeneutical imagination the intellectual and ethical habits endemic to the philosophical practice of dying. This, however, is to say that reading itself can become a deeply political activity if, entering into dialogue with the text, we are willing to risk our opinions and possibilities in order to learn

⁷² See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 388.

the political practice of living together in erotic relation to the truth fully cognizant, to the degree that we can be, of the ineluctable approach of your own concrete death. No writing more than Platonic writing invites us to learn politics as the practice of dying more insistently, and no dialogue more than the *Phaedo*, if we are willing to allow our own horizons to be affected by the things having been written.

THE SOCRATIC AFFECT

We feel the cathartic effect of the dialogue most poignantly in the middle and at the extremes. We have already felt the power of Socrates' final moments and the things Phaedo said in its wake; and, in the beginning, we have been made to share Echecrates' intense desire to know what happened on the day Socrates died but also to recognize that Phaedo's response is an *attempt* to put the truth of it into words. Now, in the middle of the dialogue, we are made to feel the power of the crisis into which those present were thrown once Simmias and Kebes had spoken out their charges against the argument, suggesting that perhaps the soul might "altogether perish" on its departure from the body.⁷³ Phaedo reports, now in direct speech to Echecrates, the impact these words had on those present:

Upon hearing these things, we were all ill disposed (*aēdōs dietethēmen*), as we told one another later, because we had been very much persuaded by the earlier account, but they now seemed to unsettle us (*anataraxai*) again and throw us down into distrust not only toward the things said previously, but also toward the things that would be said later; for fear that we should be unworthy judges or even that these things themselves might be untrustworthy.⁷⁴

This ill disposition and sense of being profoundly unsettled is that sickness we feel when the uncertainty of things joins with the certainty of death and our existential condition as finite human beings becomes palpably real. This vertiginous sickness resonates with each of us who have turned attention to death in an earnest way, as it did with Echecrates,

⁷³ *Phaedo*, 88b9.

⁷⁴ *Phaedo*, 88c1–7.

who says, “By the gods, Phaedo, I have real sympathy for you.”⁷⁵ Phaedo’s story has had a profound effect on Echecrates as Plato’s writing is to have had on us if we have been reading not only for the logical inadequacies of the arguments but also for the emotional power of the things having been said in the context in which they are said. For his part, Echecrates is like Kebes: he desires a trustworthy account. He says: “And what I really need (*panu deomai*) is some other argument which will, as from the beginning, persuade me that when someone dies the soul does not die with him.”⁷⁶ However understandable this need may be, Echecrates’ insistence on it here suggests that he has not been able to follow the course Simmias has charted to the recognition of the limits of human understanding concerning these things. Phaedo, however, indicates the degree to which he himself and, indeed, many of those present had cultivated in themselves a healthy relationship to this very finitude; for he insists that in their conversations later, after Socrates had died, they remained distrustful of the things said that day. The moment of crisis in the middle of the dialogue is not fully resolved in the end; and yet, Phaedo, like Socrates before him, and like Simmias and Kebes on the day Socrates died, remains assiduously committed to the attempt to seek truth through words. The dialogue itself is Phaedo’s second sailing.⁷⁷ And perhaps it is Plato’s as well, for it is written in memory of Socrates, whose spirit continues to effect each new generation of readers willing to listen.

Let us attend, then, finally, to how Socrates is said to have comported himself in the face of his own demise; for we hear in the things Phaedo reports a profusion of adverbs describing the way Socrates held himself toward others on that day he died. The *way* he said the things he said that day and *what* he said to those gathered there in that moment of crisis *together* articulate the deepest teachings of both Socratic and Platonic politics. Phaedo confesses that he often wondered

⁷⁵ *Phaedo*, 88c8.

⁷⁶ *Phaedo*, 88d6–8. That Plato has Echecrates adopt Kebes’ favorite use of the word “πάννυ” might be heard as a way to emphasize their mutual interest in completeness and certainty.

⁷⁷ To speak of Phaedo’s “second sailing” is to point to his own conversion to Socratic philosophy. Dorter invites us to consider Phaedo “as a symbol of the subject matter of the dialogue, for his life was characterized by liberation from bondage both in the literal and in the figurative sense of conversion to philosophy (82e ff) and the dialogue is pre-eminently about the theme of bondage and liberation . . .” See Dorter, *Plato’s Phaedo*, 10.

at Socrates, but never more than in that moment. What strikes him in particular is not that he had something to say, but, as he puts it: “what I especially wondered at him for was first this: how *pleasantly* and *kindly* and *admiringly* he received the argument (*logon*) of the young men, but then also how *acutely* he perceived what we had suffered from the words (*hupo tōn logōn*), and then how *well* he healed us and, as if he called back (*anekalesato*) those fleeing and defeated, he urged us to follow close along with him and examine the account (*logon*).”⁷⁸ The three wonderful things Phaedo mentions about Socrates here draw a picture of the virtues he embodied and the manner in which his ways of being and responding had an identifiable effect on those who encountered him. The adverbs give voice to precisely how Socrates held himself. But they describe not only how he received the argument – pleasantly, kindly, admiringly – but how these dispositions enabled him to acutely perceive what others suffered. Even before Phaedo testifies to this on behalf of those present, we heard it in the ways Socrates welcomed and encouraged Simmias to speak out his distrust of the things having been said about the immortality of the soul. Thus, we are permitted first to experience Socrates bearing up pleasantly and receiving arguments kindly and perceiving suffering acutely before Phaedo calls these things explicitly to our attention. This experience of Socratic caring is further amplified when Phaedo marks this turning point in the dialogue with the story of how Socrates played with his hair. The image is touching, intimate, sad, and playful at once, and it

⁷⁸ *Phaedo*, 89a1–7, italics added. A few peculiarities of the language of this passage are worthy of mention. First, Phaedo characterizes the objections of Simmias and Kebes as a “*λόγον*,” in the singular, giving further evidence to Dorter’s reading that the objections are really part of a single argument. See *ibid.*, 86–7. This is significant because when Phaedo remarks in this context that even Heracles could not manage against two, the many-headed Hydra and a second sea monster, and Socrates identifies himself as Iolaus, Heracles’ nephew, the battle they will take on is not between the two objections but the objections as a many-headed beast and the monster that is misology. For a different view, see Gallop, *Phaedo*, 153. The second peculiarity concerns the use of the word “*ἀνεκάλεσατο*,” which means literally to call back from the dead. This suggests that Socrates is to be understood as a kind of Orpheus, a suggestion that would lend itself to the ongoing allusions to the importance of singing throughout the dialogue. See *Phaedo*, 77e–78a, 84a–b, and 114d, for example. For a discussion of Orpheus viewed “as a mythical figure that gives shape to the belief that music is of utmost importance to the life of the cosmos, civilized society, religious cult and individual self-awareness,” see Marchenkov, *The Orpheus Myth and the Powers of Music*, xii.

reinforces in concrete terms the deep level of care Socrates had for Phaedo, and, by extension, for all those gathered.⁷⁹ This capacity to care for others even in the face of one's own death is a sign of a life well lived – of *eudaimonia*. Indeed, at the very beginning Plato has Phaedo remark on the manner in which Socrates held himself on that day: “For the man seemed to me to be happy (*eudaimōn*), Echecrates, both in his manner and his words, so fearlessly and nobly did he meet his end.”⁸⁰ This remark not only anticipates what we experience of Socrates in the dialogue, but it also calls our attention to the *philosophical* significance of Socrates' disposition. His affect had a powerful political effect; for, as Phaedo reports, it was able to heal the suffering of those present and gather them together in a common endeavor to pursue the truth, each speaking in his own voice and listening to one another in turn.

POLITICS AS SECOND SAILING

If his manner of being played a decisive role in gathering those present into community, what Socrates says to them articulates a difficult political practice. The first and main experience Socrates insists must be avoided is that “we don't become . . . misologues, as some become misanthropes.”⁸¹ Socrates puts it in stark terms, insisting that there is no greater evil than to suffer the experience of misology. He describes misology as analogous to misanthropy: it arises when you repeatedly and “without skill trust someone to excess, and believe that human-being to be in every way true (*pantapasi ge alēthē*) and sound and trustworthy, and then a little later discover that this person is base and untrustworthy.”⁸² The description of the experience is striking, for it matches precisely the experience that has thrown the gathering into crisis. For as we have heard, the desire for a *logos* that is sure in every way has led not to an end of searching but to the shared experience of unsettled sickness in the face of the certainty of death. And yet, as shared, this experience is also somehow at the root of the community

⁷⁹ *Phaedo*, 89a9–b5.

⁸⁰ *Phaedo*, 58e3–4.

⁸¹ *Phaedo*, 89d1–2.

⁸² *Phaedo*, 89d4–8.

gathered there. It lies less, however, with the experience of unsettled sickness itself, but more with the possibility of a healthy response to it. Thus, Socrates' concern in drawing attention to the experience of misology is to identify the possibility of a more artful response to *logoi* that prove to be disappointing and untrustworthy. He locates such a response in the recognition of where the limitation in fact lies, for he insists that the problem with misology is that it transfers our own human limitations onto the *logoi* themselves, blaming them for inadequacies that are our own. Thus, the beginning of a healthy response to the crisis the middle of the dialogue imposes on us is to face honestly up to our own finitude. Socrates tells Phaedo that such a response involves a refusal and acceptance at once:

First, let's beware of this [misology] and let us not admit into the soul [the thought] that there is a chance that there is nothing sound (*hugies*) in *logoi*; but let us far rather admit that we ourselves are not yet healthy, but must act like men and be eager to be sound, you and the others for the sake of your whole life hereafter, me for the sake of death itself.⁸³

Socrates does not simply posit the certainty of *logoi* but insists that the healthy, more artful response to our disappointment with their perceived inadequacies lies in a sober decision to believe in their soundness, to recognize our limits, and to seek in that context to become ourselves sound. This more artful response is done not simply for the sake of the present argument but for the sake of an entire life. Socrates renders the difficulty of this decision palpable and concrete by revealing his own struggle, for he goes on immediately to say: “for at present, concerning that thing itself [namely, death], I indeed run the risk of not being philosophically disposed (*ou philosophōs echein*), but like the thoroughly uneducated, of being disposed in a way that desires victory (*philonikōs*).”⁸⁴ The juxtaposition of the adverbs draws two ways of being into contrast: the one recognizes limitations and seeks wisdom, the other succumbs to the desire to win and seeks comfort in affirmation. The contrast draws our attention to the history of the conflict between Socrates and the sophists, and specifically between Socrates and

⁸³ *Phaedo*, 90d9–91a1.

⁸⁴ *Phaedo*, 91a1–3.

Callicles in the *Gorgias*, where two ways of life are contrasted, the political life in which words are used to win authority and influence and the philosophical life in which spoken words attempt to uncover the truth.⁸⁵ But in the *Gorgias*, the philosophical life was characterized by Socrates as an attempt to practice the political art truly, which turned out to involve the art of speaking toward the best.⁸⁶ Here, as Socrates candidly admits his ongoing struggle to maintain his philosophical composure in relation to death itself, he continues not merely to advocate a philosophical politics intent on speaking toward the best, but he also performs it by uncovering his own struggle and thereby establishing a community capable of seeking truth in the immanent shadow of death.⁸⁷

With regard to his own struggle, Socrates unfolds an autobiographical account that beautifully rehearses the path on which those gathered there had traversed together. He, like Kebes, was wondrously desirous of a grandiose kind of wisdom that, indeed, proved elusive.⁸⁸ In the wake of this disappointment, Socrates says he undertook a “second sailing,” and like Simmias, sought a way “to sail through life, seizing upon the best and most difficult to refute human *logoi*.”⁸⁹ In speaking of his “second sailing,” which involves taking up oars when the wind fails, Socrates locates the power to navigate a way through the crisis he faced earlier in life, which is the very crisis they face in the cell there together, in the decision both to trust the power of words and to undertake strenuous effort. This is how Socrates put it:

So it seemed to me that I should take refuge in λόγοι, and investigate through them the truth of beings (*tōn ontōn tēn alētheian*). But perhaps in a way it is not like that to which I am likening it. For I in no way agree that someone investigating beings through *logoi* is examining them through likenesses any more than someone investigating beings through actions.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ *Gorgias*, 485d–86c. See [chapter 3](#).

⁸⁶ *Gorgias*, 521d6–e2. See latter parts of [chapter 3](#).

⁸⁷ Thus Socrates insists that they give more thought to the truth than to the fate of Socrates, *Phaedo*, 91c1–2.

⁸⁸ *Phaedo*, 96a–99d.

⁸⁹ *Phaedo*, 85c7–d2.

⁹⁰ *Phaedo*, 99e4–100a3.

The attempt to articulate the truth of beings in words can uncover as much of them as their very activities reveal. Here Socrates simply reaffirms the point he made earlier with regard to misology, for the thought must not be admitted into the soul that *logoi* are themselves unsound.⁹¹ The *logoi* have the capacity to uncover the truth of things. But this, however, is possible only if the attempt to articulate the truth of things is held accountable to an ideal that, despite being ultimately elusive to us, is nevertheless assiduously sought.

This is the context in which Socrates refers to those “much babbled about things” from which he makes his beginning, “positing as an hypothesis that there is some Beautiful Itself by Itself, and some Good and Large and all the rest.”⁹² What is striking about the way Socrates introduces these ideals here is how undogmatic he is about them: he posits Beauty Itself as ultimately responsible for the beauty of things, but refuses to clarify precisely how beautiful things participate in the Beautiful. In fact, he goes so far as to embrace his ignorance about the precise nature of the relationship between the ideals and the things that show them forth. Rather, he says, “simply (*haplōs*), artlessly (*atechnōs*) and perhaps naively (*euēthōs*), I hold this close to myself: that nothing makes a thing beautiful but the presence of or communion with that Beautiful – or however or in whatever way it happens; for on this I do not assert anything definite (*diischurizomai*).”⁹³ The adverbs heard here articulate the manner in which Socrates embraces the limits of his own

⁹¹ John Sallis puts it nicely when he writes, “The *logoi* do not provide some kind of substitutes, as it were, for the beings themselves, but rather they serve to open up a way of access to beings that is appropriate to a being like man whose comportment to beings is intrinsically linked to ignorance.” See Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues*, 43.

⁹² *Phaedo*, 100b3–7.

⁹³ *Phaedo*, 100d3–7. Klein recognizes that by positing ideals in this way, Socrates returns us to a more ordinary attitude toward things: “We must not overlook the fact that the procedure by ‘hypothesis’ stressed by Plato is *not* a specifically ‘scientific’ method but is that original attitude of human reflection prior to all science which is revealed directly in speech as it exhibits and judges things. Thus, compared to the study of nature embarked on by the physiologists, that ‘second sailing’ (δεύτερος πλοῦς) of Socrates, which consists of ‘taking refuge in reasonable speech (εἰς τοὺς λόγους καταφυγεῖν – *Phaedo* 99E), is indeed nothing else than a return to the *ordinary* attitude of the *dianoia*; it is for this reason that Plato can characterize the method of ‘hypothesis’ as ‘simple and artless and perhaps naïve’” See Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thoughts and the Origin of Algebra*, 73. Stern recognizes the importance of this *diischurizomai* as pointing to the larger critique of dogmatism in the dialogue. Stern, *Socratic Rationalism and Political Philosophy*, 25, 189. See 63c1–2 and 114d1 for examples of how the term appears in the *Phaedo*.

ability to grasp precisely the nature of this relationship. He remains, however, happy to posit the existence of Beauty Itself and of some communion between it and beautiful things because it offers a way to seek the beauty of things with others through words. Whatever else this attempt to follow along after the posited ideals involves, it is undertaken here in the *Phaedo* explicitly for the sake of establishing a healthy relationship with words through which our common condition of sickness unto death might be transformed into a common attempt to seek the Just, the Beautiful, and the Good in and through the words we speak to and with one another.

In a response to Raphael Woolf, James Wood captures the proper meaning of hypothesis as Socrates seems to use it in the *Phaedo*. He writes:

This belief [in the Forms and their kinship with the soul] is good and noble because it supports an elevated way of life, a virtuous and philosophical life, *even if* it is merely posited and never proved, and even if it is not literally believed, but merely upheld as a possibility, a goal, or a regulative ideal. In other words, one should live *as if* it were true, at the same time as one continuously subjects its consequences and applications to investigation and never loses sight of its hypothetical status (cf. 101d).⁹⁴

These hypothetical ideals are erotic in a double sense. First, as ideals, they call us beyond the realities of our present modes of relation and draw us toward to new, more just and beautiful possibilities for human community. Second, however, as hypothetical, these ideals require the community to cultivate a culture of continuous critical questioning in order to determine how best to translate these ideals into new, more just and beautiful realities. Their erotic character is thus felt in their allure as ideals and in their elusiveness as hypotheses. These Socratic hypothetical ideals are much babbled about not because they are certain, eternal, and permanent but because they are capable of drawing those willing to seek them *as if* they surely existed into more just and truthful relation to one another. Plato writes this sober Socratic idealism into the text, and nowhere more eloquently than in the *Phaedo*, by setting it always into concrete ethical-political contexts in which the attempt to speak the

⁹⁴ See Woolf, "Misology and Truth," 22.

truth is always animated by a desire to seek the Just, the Beautiful, and the Good. The topography of Platonic politics, then, must be located in the figure of Socrates, the true Platonic erotic ideal, drawn in so compelling a way as to move us, generation after generation, to live a life and practice a death together animated by a common concern for justice and truth.

The topography of Platonic politics thus appears in the space between the last words of Socrates and the last words of the *Phaedo*, for Plato has Phaedo continue to speak precisely in order to illustrate the manner in which the life of Socrates gave rise to lives animated by an ongoing commitment to speaking the truth to and with one another. If the dialogue itself is a performance of *alētheia*, as suggested above, then Phaedo's final words remind us in superlative terms that Socrates himself might be taken to function for us the way the hypothetical ideals were discovered to function for him: as an erotic principle capable of integrating a concern for the just, the beautiful, and the good into the lives we live together. Phaedo's final words remind us that we have, like Echecrates, been listening to an attempt to speak the truth of Socrates; we have been exposed to the performance of *alētheia*. But the truth of Socrates revealed in the *Phaedo* enjoins our assiduous attempts to speak toward the best in our relationships with one another. Just how difficult this is, and how dangerous it can be, is brought into sharp relief in the *Apology of Socrates*, a dialogue to which we now turn in order to learn something of the disturbing limitations of Socratic politics and to experience the power of Platonic writing to awaken in us an abiding concern for justice and to confront us with our own failures to allow that concern to animate the ways we speak and act together in public.

5 SOCRATIC DISTURBANCES, PLATONIC POLITICS

There is at the heart of the philosophical life Plato has Socrates defend in the *Apology* an idiosyncratic, subversive, and provocative political practice.¹ The politics of Socratic philosophy is idiosyncratic insofar as it involves a peculiar way of integrating the private life of the individual into the public life of the community.² It is subversive insofar as it undermines the traditional practices of politics, which, prior to Socrates and long after him, have been designed to exploit the dichotomy between the public and the private in order to consolidate and legitimize the authority of those capable of mass manipulation.³ And Socratic politics is provocative insofar as it seeks to transform the course of the life of “each and every” individual it encounters by calling each to a higher ideal of human interaction.⁴ The idiosyncratic, subversive, and provocative dimensions of the practice of Socratic philosophy belong together as moments of an integrated and potentially transformative

¹ An original draft of this paper was presented at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia, in conjunction with a seminar on the *Apology*. Afterward, Nicolas Parra, Norman Mora, and Sergio Ariza joined the Digital Dialogue to discuss the contours of Platonic and Socratic politics in the *Apology*: Long, Christopher P., “Digital Dialogue 44: The *Apology*” (www.cplong.org/digitaldialogue/dd-44-apology/).

² The Greek *ιδιώτης* signifies a private person, an individual. The verb *συγκεράννυμι* means to mix together, mingle; from it we derive the adjective *σύγκρατος*: mixed together, blended. See *ιδιώτης*, n., *συγκεράννυμι*, v., and *σύγκρατος*, adj., in Liddell and Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*. These Greek words should be permitted to resonate in the term “idiosyncratic,” which points to the activity by which individuals are mixed together into a community. Politics is, in this sense, an idiosyncratic activity.

³ To speak in terms of a dichotomy between the private and the public here is to emphasize the extent to which these two spheres have been traditionally understood as mutually exclusive and oppositional.

⁴ *Apology*, 30e7.

political approach, the power and limitations of which can be discerned in the dialogue Socrates has with the “men of Athens” in the *Apology*.

To call the *Apology* a “dialogue” is to emphasize the continuity between this text and those others written by Plato in which Socrates is shown to enter into dialogue with individuals. Yet what sets the *Apology* apart as a *dialogue* is the manner in which Socrates addresses his philosophical attention to a multitude as opposed to an individual. Socrates himself brings this difference into sharp relief in his discussion with Polus in the *Gorgias* when he says:

I know how to bring one person as a witness of the things I say, the person toward whom my account is directed; the many, however, I gladly let alone; for I do know how to put the question [*epipsēphizein*] to one person, but with respect to the many, I do not enter into dialogue [*dialegomai*].⁵

Socrates here characterizes his encounter with an individual as an “*epipsēphizein*,” which means to put something to the vote in the Assembly. In using this political term in regard to the philosophical questioning of an individual, Socrates implicitly suggests that the practice of Socratic philosophy is analogous to the practice of Athenian politics insofar as it requires taking a stand for or against something with an eye toward the question of justice.⁶ But he also characterizes the encounter with the many that he avoids as a kind of “*dialegesthai*,” suggesting a mode of engagement fundamentally different from the rhetorical practices of Athenian politics.⁷ The *Apology of Socrates* performs the dialogue with the multitude Socrates had gladly avoided for so long.

⁵ *Gorgias*, 474a5–b1.

⁶ This difference is brought into sharp focus at the start of the *Gorgias* when Socrates insists that Gorgias enter into dialogue (διαλεχθῆναι) with him and save his presentation (ἐπίδειξις) for another time. See *Gorgias*, 447b9–c4.

⁷ Arendt insists that the central mistake of Socrates’ trial was that he addressed his judges dialogically rather than persuasively. The philosophical mode of communication (dialogue) was thus brought into conflict with the standard mode of Athenian political communication (rhetoric). Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 79. The *Gorgias*, as mentioned, illustrates the degree to which Socratic politics is predicated on undermining this distinction between philosophical dialogue and political rhetoric. Of course, Socrates often deploys the language of the law courts in his dialogues with individuals. With regard to the *Apology*, De Strycker has emphasized the extent to which Socrates both frequently uses traditional forensic language and “succeeds in converting continuous forensic speech into a dialogue, and this

There is a decisive exchange in this dialogue that articulates both the political nature of Socratic philosophy and the dangers endemic to his attempt to integrate philosophical practices into the life of the city. The exchange gives voice to the dynamics of the dialogue between Socrates and the multitude with whom he is engaged. In it, the idiosyncratic, subversive, and provocative dimensions of Socratic politics can be discerned:

Know well, men of Athens that if long ago *I* attempted to do political things [*epecheirēsa prattein ta politika pragmata*], I should have died long ago, and benefited neither you nor myself. And do not be angry [*mē achthesthe*] with me for speaking the truth; for no human-being will be saved who opposes either you or any other multitude and prevents many unjust and illegal things from happening in the city. But it is necessary for the one who really fights for justice to practice privately [*idiōteuein*], not publically [*dēmosieuein*], if one is to survive even a short time.⁸

To hear this passage as an “exchange” requires a bit of hermeneutic imagination; yet the way the text is *written* excites the imagination and encourages those of us encountering it to hear what is voiced but remains unwritten. This, indeed, already points in an anticipatory manner to the practice of a Platonic politics that can be heard in the things Socrates says if they must apprehended in a different register. Platonic politics trades on the dynamic relationship between reader and writer rather than on the dramatic action that determines the relationship between Socrates and those “men of Athens” attending to his speech. The activation of our hermeneutical imagination as readers may, in fact, turn out to be a fundamental feature of Platonic politics as it attempts to cultivate in us capacities that will empower the philosophical practices of a more integrated politics. In order to better discern the Platonic politics at work in and through the dialogical presentation of the practice of Socratic politics, it will be necessary to remain attentive to the way the written text cultivates certain hermeneutical excellences in its readers designed to do with

enables him to use his dialectic patterns of argumentation.” Slings and De Strycker, *Plato’s Apology of Socrates*, 38–9. Marina McCoy has argued eloquently for the continuity between rhetoric and philosophy in the *Apology*. See McCoy, *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists*, 41–6.

⁸ *Apology*, 31d5–32a3.

us what Socrates himself seeks to do with those he encounters: transform the course of life of individuals in ways that are animated by the question of justice.

Returning, then, to the exchange between Socrates and the multitude under consideration, we hear in the cited passage (31d5–32a3) first the repetition of the subtle and subversive insult with which the dialogue itself began: in refusing from the beginning to call those he addresses “*dikastai*,” jurors, Socrates at once subverts the conventions of the court and calls into question the capacity of his listeners to discern what is just.⁹ But here it is not so much the insult as the provocative claim that Socrates would have died long ago if he attempted to do political things that seems to have caused a disturbance in the audience. The disturbance itself can be heard only in the Socratic response, which is articulated in the middle-passive voice and the present tense of a prohibitive subjunctive – “*mē achthesthe*” – “... do not be angry ...” The claim that if he had attempted to do political things he would not have survived long seems to have provoked a reaction of indignation in the audience. Indeed, if the progressive-repeated aspect of the present tense in Socrates’ Greek underscores the degree to which such disturbances were part of the ongoing dynamic between Socrates and his listeners, the middle-passive voice suggests the degree to which Socrates at once actively provokes and passively suffers the affects of these disturbances.¹⁰ As James Riddell has emphasized, “the *dikastai* were

⁹ Already in the first sentence of the dialogue, Socrates gives voice to a provocative private truth and a subversive public one: “How you, men of Athens, have been affected by my accusers, I do not know.” See *Apology*, 17a1–2. The public truth articulated here is that the “men of Athens” are in no position to judge the case they are hearing; the private truth, which will itself be shown to have powerful political implications, is that Socrates recognizes that he does not know. The first sentence already points to the central tension of the text, namely, the implicit claim of the public to be capable of discerning the just and Socrates’ recognition of his own ignorance. The insult with which the dialogue begins only comes clearly into focus at *Apology*, 40a2, when Socrates reserves the title of “*δικασταί*” for those who voted to acquit him. For a discussion of this, see Brann, “The Offense of Socrates: A Re-Reading of Plato’s *Apology*,” 1.

¹⁰ Post suggests the degree to which the aspect of verbs in the imperative are significant in Greek drama, a point that is not made in regard to Platonic texts specifically but that may nevertheless be applied to the dramas that are the dialogues. See Post, “Dramatic Uses of the Greek Imperative,” 35. If this suggestion applies to the Platonic texts, then the differing aspects of the tenses in which the imperatives are articulated take on significance. Here, the deployment of the present, with its progressive-repeated aspect, can be heard to subtly

animated listeners . . . It seems to have been a common practice not only of political but also of judicial assemblies to express their pleasure or displeasure at what was said.”¹¹

Listening actively to the agitated responses of the “men of Athens” as Socrates makes his speech in defense of the philosophical life uncovers the political dimensions of such a life. By attending carefully to the moments of disturbance in the speech, we will discern something deeper about the idiosyncrasies of the practice of Socratic politics; for these moments of subversive provocation articulate the tensions endemic to the Socratic attempt to integrate philosophical excellences into the body politic. They stand as signs of the difficulty the city has in taking up into the very center of itself such a one as Socrates, who, as the embodiment of a peculiar kind of political virtue, stands as a kind of *hexis* the city shows itself to be unable to cultivate or even tolerate for long. That which most disturbs the “men of Athens” in the dialogical exchange we have been considering is shown by the action of the dialogue itself to be true: if Socrates attempts to do political things truly, he will die.

The performance of this failure to integrate philosophy into politics shifts the register in which the *Apology of Socrates* must be read as a political text.¹² As a defense of Socrates in the objective sense, Plato thematizes the failure as an incapacity. The drama of the dialogue

reinforce the extent to which these disturbances were a continuing dynamic element of the encounter between Socrates and the “men of Athens.” The use of the aorist tense, with its completed aspect, would suggest that the disruptions were completed, even if their having occurred had ongoing implications. See Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, 410–1.

¹¹ Plato and Riddell, *The Apology of Plato*, xvii. Robert Wallace suggests that disturbances had a threefold practical importance in the Athenian Assembly. (1) They set a time limit on speakers in a context in which no official time limit was established; (2) they expressed the community’s power of free speech; and (3) they reinforced the political idea that speakers were not tyrants to whom one needed to listen in passive silence. Wallace, Robert, “The Power to Speak – and Not to Listen – in Ancient Athens,” 225–6. This reinforces the idea that the activity of disturbing (θορυβεῖν) was one important way the Athenian citizens participated in political dialogue with speakers in the Assembly. The very real danger this practice posed, however, is that some speakers would be deprived of the ability to explain their position with sufficient nuance. This, it seems, is part of what made it so important for Socrates to control the disturbances of his audience.

¹² The genitive in the title of the dialogue must be permitted to resonate in both its subjective and objective senses: the defense is both that undertaken by Socrates, it is Socrates’ own defense, but it is also the defense of Socrates in the objective sense, for it is a defense of the practice of Socratic philosophy as itself a political activity.

eloquently articulates the inability of the city to allow Socrates to settle into its character. By rendering this failure legible, however, Plato's writing presses each of us encountering it to reconsider the manner in which we too collude in divorcing our philosophical commitments from our social-political relations with one another. What Socrates fails to do with the "men of Athens," Plato may yet succeed in doing with us, his readers. Platonic writing itself, then, must be understood in political terms, for it calls us to consider the course of our lives and compels us to attempt, in each situation and with each individual we encounter, to speak the whole truth and to trust that there is justice to be heard in what is said.¹³

Just as the passage we have been considering subverts the traditional distinction between the public and the private by situating politics as the struggle for true justice in the private sphere, so too the Platonic politics we have been attempting to discern subverts the traditional distinction between politics and philosophy by demonstrating the political potential of philosophical writing. Thus, the *Apology* not only presents Socratic politics in action, lending insight into its contours, but it also articulates the poetics of Platonic politics in writing, for it is crafted in a way that compels those who encounter the text to bear witness to the failure of citizenship performed there. Whether Plato will fail with us as Socrates did with those "men of Athens" remains an open question, one, however, that cannot even arise if the distinction between the *topology* of Socratic politics and the *topography* of Platonic politics is eclipsed.

The *topology* of Socratic politics points to the place (*topos*) where Socrates practices a way of speaking (*legein*) that attempts to orient individuals and their relations with one another toward the just and the good. The topology of Socratic politics is thus discernible in each dialogue in which Socrates appears. Yet, in the *Apology*, the public *topos* of the things Socrates says opens a space for the decisive encounter between philosophy and politics that marks the site of the poetic practice of *Platonic* writing. The *topography* of Platonic politics thus points to the place (*topos*) where Plato practices a way of writing (*graphein*) that attempts to turn the attention of the reader toward the question of the good and the just. This turning, which happens often in that most

¹³ Cf. *Apology* 17b4–c2.

intimate space between reader and writing, is of decisive *political* importance. For genuine political transformation first becomes possible there, where the capacity to imagine life differently is awakened. And once awakened, this imaginative capacity resists confinement and attempts, in hermeneutical dialogue, to transform the concrete dynamics of actual human interactions. Here, Platonic and Socratic politics dovetail, for the practice of Socratic politics, like the poetics of Platonic politics, is guided by the fundamental recognition that human political life can only be pressed toward justice if individuals are made to feel the powerful possibilities that open when the life of each is alive to the ideal of justice *as a question capable of animating the life of a community*.

SOCRATIC DISTURBANCES

To speak philosophically in a political context is disturbing. Recognizing this, Socrates begins his defense by emphasizing the difference between his way of speaking and those “clever at speaking” (*deinos legein*) the “men of Athens” are accustomed to hearing in court. The distinction he makes about clever speakers is itself clever; for it articulates at once the continuity and discontinuity between the practice of Socratic and that of Athenian politics. Both traditional Athenian and Socratic politics are performed *as ways of speaking*, but only Socratic politics is practiced in the name of truth and with trust in justice. Thus, Socrates insists at the beginning that the very performance of his idiosyncratic and habitual ways of speaking stands itself as proof that he is *not* clever at speaking, “unless they call clever those who speak the truth.”¹⁴ If this is what his accusers mean – which, of course, they don’t – then Socrates is willing to claim the title of orator (*rhētōr*), for

¹⁴ *Apology*, 17b4–5. The Greek is: “εἰ μὴ ἄρα δεινὸν καλοῦσιν οὗτοι λέγειν τὸν τάληθῃ λέγοντα.” De Strycker has called attention to the use of hyperbaton here as a way for Socrates to disjoin the elements of the common phrase “δεινὸς λέγειν.” See Slings and De Strycker, *Plato’s Apology of Socrates*, 242. The disjunction, however, calls attention to the multiplicity of the meanings of the Greek “δεινός,” which can mean clever in the sense of capable, terrible in the sense of fearsome, strange in the sense of wondrous, and powerful in the sense of able to accomplish much. The ways of Socratic speaking is, of course, δεινός in all these diverse senses, but what makes it powerful is its relation to the truth, for it attempts to speak the truth without pretending to possess the truth.

as he says: “you will hear from me the whole truth (*pasan tēn alētheian*)” but not in the conventional way, for “I trust the things I say are just (*pisteuō gar dikaia einai ha legō*).”¹⁵ Here already the basic logic of Socratic politics can be heard: its attempt to articulate the whole truth is animated by a trust in justice. To trust, however, is not to know, and so the entire philosophical practice of Socratic politics must here be understood to be committed to the belief that words, when they are rooted in an assiduous commitment to articulate the whole truth, however ultimately elusive, are capable of giving voice to justice.¹⁶

In order to open a space for the possibility of such a politics of truth and trust, Socrates seeks to minimize the disruptive effect his idiosyncratic ways of speaking have on those listening by making this request:

If, as I am making my defense, you hear me saying the same things I am accustomed to say in the agora around the tables and elsewhere, where many of you have heard me, do not be amazed or create a disturbance [*thorubein*] because of this.¹⁷

Here Socrates unapologetically subverts the standard idiom of an *apology* or “defense.” He will speak here as he speaks everywhere. And even if we recognize this as a kind of proleptic rhetorical strategy that anticipates and attempts to undermine an expected response before it happens, it is born of his steadfast attempts to speak the truth and do just things irrespective of the context in which he appears.¹⁸ If, for

¹⁵ *Apology*, 17b7–c3.

¹⁶ Burnet suggests that this trust in justice is what allows Socrates to remain unconcerned with “choice diction and artificial arrangement.” Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito*, 150. Yet Socrates shows himself in the *Apology* not to do away with certain rhetorical ways of speaking in general nor, indeed, with certain tropes of forensic rhetoric in particular. The difference between his ways of speaking and those of traditional Athenian politics lies not in eschewing common rhetorical tropes but in assiduously orienting everything that is said toward the question of truth, trusting throughout that only such an orientation gives voice to justice. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between truth and justice along these lines, see Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*. McCoy recognizes the purpose to which Socrates intends his own clever speaking: “It is not a lack of rhetoric that distinguishes Socrates from the sophists, or others who are ‘clever speakers,’ but rather his commitment to use rhetoric in order to cultivate virtue.” See McCoy, *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists*, 41.

¹⁷ *Apology*, 17c7–d1.

¹⁸ Socrates’ steadfast character was notoriously frustrating to many. Callicles thinks Socrates is grandstanding when he says he steadfastly follows the things philosophy is always saying. See *Gorgias*, 482a. Alcibiades, of course, is frustrated by Socrates’ unwillingness to trade

Socrates, to be a true orator is thus to speak the truth, for those listening, to be a true juror is to attend to and judge the truth of what is said. Socrates insists that the men of Athens must be able to discern “if I speak justly or not; for the excellence of a judge (*dikastou*) is just this, as that of a speaker (*rhētoros*) is to speak truth.”¹⁹ In saying these things, Socrates sets the standard according to which some of these “men of Athens” will be judged as genuine “jurors” – “*dikastai*” – for these will be those capable of discerning justice in the things said truly.

Yet the majority will show themselves to be unable to discern what is true from what is expedient, what is just from what is customary, and they will give voice to this incapacity each time they do in fact create a disturbance (*thorubein*).²⁰ According to Burnet, the term “*thorubein*” means “to interrupt” by means of a noisy demonstration, be that of applause or protest.²¹ De Strycker, however, amends this, insisting that in “rhetorical practice and theory, θόρυβος and θορυβεῖν always refer to *indignant* reactions of the audience.”²² Thus, the disturbances enunciate strong resistance to the things Socrates says. Yet they are “heard” here in a highly mediated manner, as Socrates either anticipates or responds directly to them – in the *Apology*, the “men of Athens” are not permitted to speak in their own voices, but their voices are nevertheless heard each time Socrates himself enjoins them not to interrupt.

more beauty for less in his relationship with Alcibiades. See *Symposium*, 218e–221b. Arlene Saxonhouse has suggested the degree to which Socrates is “need-less” and thus is not moved by shame in the way many are. See Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, 74–5.

¹⁹ *Apology*, 18a4–6.

²⁰ If, as Dougal Blyth suggests, Socrates’ defense is a “moral test” for the jurors designed to challenge their authority to judge, then the disturbances may best be heard as signs of the difficulty they have in passing this test. See Blyth, Dougal, “Socrates’ Trial and Conviction of the Jurors in Plato’s *Apology*,” 7. That Socrates is unwilling to call the “men of Athens” “jurors” from the beginning indicates the extent to which the capacity of those listening to judge is a central concern of the dialogue. Brann recognizes the disruptions as signs that the Athenians take Socrates’ activities seriously: “To be sure, it is not good to interrupt a speaker, but their clamor is brief and controllable – and it comes correctly, at crucial points. Here in effect the attention of a whole city has been gained by one man, a philosopher.” Brann, “The Offense of Socrates: A Re-Reading of Plato’s *Apology*,” 15. Sallis suggests that the points at which the disturbances occur “are indicative of those elements in Socrates’ speech which most provoke the ‘men of Athens.’” See Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues*, 61.

²¹ Plato, *Euthyphro*, *Apology of Socrates*, and *Crito*, 152.

²² Slings and De Strycker, *Plato’s Apology of Socrates*, 248.

Aside from the initial, proleptic passage at 17d1 in which Socrates asks his listeners not to be amazed or create a disturbance if he speaks in court just as he speaks elsewhere, Socrates calls attention to the disruptive reaction of the audience four times, each time addressing the audience directly in the prohibitive subjunctive.²³ In each of these four moments of injunction, we hear something of the idiosyncratic, provocative, and subversive dimensions of Socratic politics. Yet to trace these moments of disturbance is also to map an itinerary through the topology of Socratic politics that leads, once traversed, to another *topos*: the *topography* of Platonic politics, where the dialogue between Socrates and the “men of Athens” can be heard to provoke a response among a reading public designed to cultivate a commitment to philosophy *as* a political practice.

Let us turn our attention, then, to these four disturbing moments of disruption.

A CERTAIN KIND OF WISDOM

The first disruption occurs in the wake of Socrates’ attempt to respond to the charges of those he calls his “first accusers,” namely, those numerous, unnamed people who have propagated the idea that Socrates is wise, impious, and able to make the worse argument the stronger.²⁴ Socrates traces the source of this reputation back to “a certain kind of wisdom (*sophian tina*).” This kind of wisdom he identifies as: “Human wisdom, perhaps (*hēper estin isōs anthrōpinē sophia*).”²⁵ With the deployment of little words, “*tina*” – “a certain,” and “*isōs*” – “perhaps,” Socrates subverts the common understanding of the

²³ Iterations of the verb “θορυβεῖν” appear at 17d1 (in a proleptic way), 20e4 (anticipating a response to Socrates’ appeal to the oracle), 21a5 (when Chaerephon is said to ask if anyone is wiser than Socrates), 27b1, and again in the same context at 27b5 (when Socrates proceeds in his usual manner with Meletus, and Meletus resists), and twice at 30c2–3 (when Socrates insists that Meletus and Anytus will not harm him). Excluding the first instance, then, there are four moments in which Socrates calls attention to actual or possible interruptions.

²⁴ *Apology*, 18a7–c1. Of course, although the accusers remain unnamed, Socrates does imply that one is a “writer of comedies” (18d1), namely, Aristophanes.

²⁵ *Apology*, 20d6–8.

meaning of wisdom, suggesting that is not the possession of determinate knowledge but a kind of awareness of a lack.²⁶ The subversive idea that true human wisdom is this awareness of an epistemic lack is punctuated, then, by a provocative retort to those who claim Socrates is wise in the traditional sense that he possesses determinate knowledge. He insists “I, indeed (*egōge*), do not possess this knowledge (*epistamai*), but whoever says I do lies and speaks to slander me.”²⁷ This marks the moment when Socrates speaks directly to the “men of Athens (*ō andres Athēnaioi*)” in the vocative and enjoins them not to interrupt (*mē phorubēsēte*) even if they think he speaks big words. The prohibitive subjunctive here seems to anticipate an interruption rather than respond to one, but Socrates knows well that what he has said is provocative, and he anticipates the impact of what he is about to say: “I shall bring forward for you a witness as to what my wisdom is actually and what sort it is: the god at Delphi.”²⁸

The speech act addresses the “men of Athens” directly and with force. Implicit in it is the recognition that the human wisdom of which Socrates speaks and claims for himself is of profound *political* importance. Socrates heightens the rhetorical effect this first gesture toward a possible disruption has by situating it in a context in which it first becomes clear that his philosophical activity enjoins a certain political practice, one, indeed, itself underwritten by Apollo. In addressing the Athenians directly in this way, Socrates’ words are designed to have the same stinging effect on the audience his philosophical practices have had on the city for so many years.²⁹ The words are designed to subvert the traditional understanding of human wisdom, calling attention to the

²⁶ Along with these little words, the suffix *-περ* attached to the article, *ἧ*, may be heard to heighten awareness in the listener that something worth emphasizing is being said. See Denniston, *The Greek Particles*, 2nd, 487–90. But Denniston also notes that it can just be a stylistic substitution for the simple relative pronoun.

²⁷ *Apology*, 20e2–3.

²⁸ 20e6–8.

²⁹ Indeed, here already, Socrates is practicing the politics of arousing (*ἐγείρεσθαι*) he explicitly embraces when he characterizes himself as a gadfly stationed by the god to awaken the city as if it were a noble horse (*Apology*, 30e1–31a1). This stinging should be understood as provocative in the sense of a gadfly rather than as paralyzing in the sense of a torpedo fish. Cf. *Meno*, 80c–d. John Sallis recognizes the degree to which Socrates “is himself assuming the stance of a judge” in these early passages of the *Apology*. See Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues*, 29.

manner in which the profession of knowledge functions as a mode of political legitimation.

DISQUIETING QUESTIONS

The second mention of a possible disruption is more palpably urgent. It comes soon after the first, but not before Socrates has sought to reduce something of the distance established by his subversive and provocative comments about human wisdom and the testimony of the god. He calls Chaerephon his “companion” (*hetairos*) and “the companion of a great number of you,” and suggests that it was Chaerephon’s impulsiveness that led him ask the oracle “if anyone was wiser than me.”³⁰ Yet the appeal to a common companion and the story as to how this question came to be posed to the oracle seems not to have been well received, for Socrates is himself moved to repeat the admonition not to interrupt, saying, “and, as I say, gentlemen, do not create a disturbance (*mē thorubeite*).”³¹ Here, however, Socrates uses the present as opposed to the aorist tense, which suggests a certain urgency on his part and might indeed indicate that the disruption Socrates seeks to avoid is already being voiced.³² The progressive-repeated aspect of the present signifies a heightening of tension in the situation that suggests the degree to which the men of Athens are becoming increasingly vexed by the things Socrates is saying.

The vexation of the men of Athens here mirrors, in fact, the response the citizens had over time to Socrates’ attempts to refute the god by going around the city questioning all who professed knowledge.

³⁰ *Apology*, 20e9–21a6.

³¹ *Apology*, 21a4.

³² De Strycker says the shift from the aorist to the present “is probably a more urgent appeal. In itself, the negated imperative can, but need not, imply that the action forbidden by the speaker is already taking place.” He is cautious here not to insist that the shift requires us to understand the disruption as actively happening when Socrates articulates the admonition. See Slings and De Strycker, *Plato’s Apology of Socrates*, 272. His caution seems to be due to Post’s insistence that “The common explanation of the succession μή θορυβήσητε, μή θορυβεῖτε in the *Apology*, that an uproar has arisen in the meantime, is most improbable though it cannot be disproved.” See Post, “Dramatic Uses of the Greek Imperative,” 42n12.

This philosophical activity had concrete political implications: as he questioned those with the highest reputations and uncovered their lack of knowledge, he was increasingly becoming hated (*apēchthanomēn*).³³ This hatred, a concern for which is voiced in Socrates' repeated admonitions not to disrupt him, is rooted not only in the annoying practices of Socratic questioning, but more fundamentally in Socrates' disquieting insistence that the city and each of the citizens take the practice of questioning up into their very character as an animating principle. The increased urgency of the present imperative gives voice to this disquieting dimension of Socratic philosophy. It comes precisely as Socrates attempts to articulate how his life is oriented by a relationship with an ideal that escapes the perverse existing conditions in which politics is practiced in the city.

By allowing his life to be animated by a love of wisdom, that is, by living a philosophical life in which wisdom is recognized as ultimately elusive yet assiduously sought, Socrates risks becoming an idiotic pariah. Indeed, as will be heard, it is precisely his unwillingness to allow himself to be made into a pariah by advocating for a punishment of exile once he is found guilty that leads ultimately to his death, for the city cannot integrate a love of wisdom in this sense into its character. But Socratic idiocy, however foolish it appears to those caught up in and dependent on the logic of traditional politics, must be understood in terms of the Greek "*idiōtēs*," which means that which is most one's own and thus points to one's most intimate philosophical and existential commitments. To take up the practice of philosophy in the sense of a life lived in erotic pursuit of an elusive wisdom that remains nevertheless capable of powerfully transforming the nature of human relations is to refuse *in a certain way* to be integrated into the life of the community. But ultimately, Socratic idiocy is idiosyncratic, for it attempts, although ultimately fails, to integrate itself into the very center of political life. Thus, although it refuses a certain integration, one that would require relinquishing the practice of questioning and the erotic search for wisdom, it embraces the possibility of another, more radical because more intimate connection between philosophy and politics. An intimate bond

³³ *Apology*, 21e4.

between philosophy and politics would involve each citizen taking up the practice of philosophy as the very animating principle of human existence. Such an endeavor would transform the city itself, for it would orient it by the very practices of its members toward erotic ideals capable of moving it in the direction of the just. The hatred this attempt at intimate integration engenders is an indication of its transformative power. Athens was right to see Socrates as a threat to its political practices; its response, however, was rooted in an inability to allow the excellences Socrates embodied to settle into its soul. Unable to cultivate the Socratic *hexis*, Athens sought catharsis. The execution of Socrates marked his greatest political failure, for it testified to his ultimate inability to cultivate the excellence of philosophy in the citizens of his own beloved city. But this failure is not without a degree of success, for as Socrates himself suggests, a shift of only thirty votes would have acquitted him.³⁴

SOCRATIC IDIOSYNCRASY

The possibility that the idiotic activity of philosophy might be taken up as an active condition of the soul of each citizen and thus woven into the life of the city is heard in the third moment in which Socrates admonishes against disruption. This time, however, the admonishment seems directed toward Meletus and it is made by Socrates as he marshals the influence of the audience in an attempt to make Meletus respond to his questions.³⁵ The situation, indeed, is familiar; for if Socrates shows himself in the dialogues to address a multiplicity of people as opposed to an individual, it is often to leverage a sense of shame in order to coerce

³⁴ *Apology*, 36a5. This suggests that 220 of the 500-member dicast voted “not guilty.” See Brickhouse and Smith, *The Trial and Execution of Socrates: Sources and Controversies*, 60n40.

³⁵ There is some controversy here and a possible corruption of the text. The manuscripts have “*θορυβεῖτω*,” which would suggest that Socrates is admonishing Meletus himself to stop making one interruption after another. Although De Strycker supports this reading, he points to an objection that suggests that the text is corrupted and the second person plural imperative should be read here: “*θορυβεῖτε*.” See Slings and De Strycker, *Plato’s Apology of Socrates*, 310. But here it does not seem that the jurors are in the act of shouting, which, as De Strycker points out, would be required if the correction were adopted. The reading set forth here takes the received manuscripts at face value.

his interlocutor into responding to his questions.³⁶ Here Meletus refuses to respond immediately to Socrates' attempt to show that he does in fact believe in gods, for he believes his philosophical activities to be divine, because they have been enjoined by "the god at Delphi." Meletus is finally made to respond, agreeing that "no one" believes in divine activities without believing in divinities. Yet, whatever the merits or limitations are of the argument Socrates himself brings to bear against Meletus, the important dynamic here is the degree to which Socrates is able to marshal the audience to exert influence on his behalf. Socrates himself emphasizes this when he expresses facetious gratitude to Meletus for responding to him although Meletus was "compelled by these men here."³⁷ The ability to move the multitude to compel Meletus in this way gestures to the possibility that the Socratic practice of philosophy is not completely impotent. Indeed, one might argue that the potency of the practice of philosophy and the danger that power posed to the structures of authority in the city itself is the most eloquent testimony to the practical power of the practice of Socratic philosophy.

There is yet more to this moment of admonition as well, for Socrates not only marshals the influence of the multitude on his behalf, but by using the same term with Meletus that he used to address the recalcitrance of the men of Athens, he establishes a parallel between what he is trying to do with Meletus the individual and what he is trying to do with the multitude. To say "*thorubeitō*" to Meletus when he has said "*thorubēsēte*" to the men of Athens is to suggest a deep continuity between the practice of Socratic philosophy in its attempts to turn each individual encountered toward the question of the good and the just and the practice of a public defense that attempts to do the same with a multitude. That the practice of Socratic philosophy is disturbing to individuals and to the multitude in a similar way suggests the degree to which the practice itself is political, for just as it disrupts the manner in which individuals enter into political community, it disrupts the way the city understands itself as a community of individuals. The Socratic

³⁶ In the *Protagoras*, Socrates leverages precisely such a sense of shame in his discussion with Protagoras. See *Protagoras*, 348c. For a discussion of this, see Long, "Crisis of Community."

³⁷ *Apology*, 27c4–5.

admonition not to disrupt is symptomatic of the difficulties endemic to Socrates' attempts at political idiosyncrasy.

AWAKENING THE EXCELLENCES OF A PHILOSOPHICAL POLITICS

In the *Apology*, Socrates remains unwilling to establish a sharp division between the individuals he has historically encountered as he practiced philosophy and the body of citizens he presently addresses. This, indeed, is the subversive side of his continual emphasis that he will speak here as he speaks everywhere. It is a point to which he returns just prior to the fourth and final admonition against disruption he levels in the text.³⁸ Here, the admonition against disruption is again articulated in the present tense, suggesting that the men of Athens are in fact actively voicing their resistance to the things Socrates is saying. Indeed, when Socrates makes mention of the disruption, it seems already to have been building for some time as he insistently argued that he would not cease practicing philosophy even if that were offered as a condition under which they would acquit him.³⁹ In this context, the practice of philosophy itself is shown to refuse to respect the boundary between the private life of the individual and the public life of the community. Socrates insists that he will “not cease practicing philosophy” nor encouraging *in his customary way* each person he meets to care for wisdom and truth and the best possible condition of the soul. He explicitly asserts the degree to which this practice refuses to respect traditional boundaries. It is excessive and intrusive: “I do this with whomever I happen to meet, young and old, citizen and stranger, but more with the citizens, for you are closer kin to me.”⁴⁰ Later, of course, Socrates even shows philosophy to exceed the boundary between life

³⁸ Indeed, in the previous context, iterations of the verb “θορυβεῖν” actually appear twice, first as directed to the men of Athens, who are asked not to create a disturbance if Socrates proceeds in his usual way, and second, as discussed, as directed toward Meletus. See *Apology*, 27b1–5. Socrates is well aware of how disturbing is his refusal to abide by the strict distinction between the ways individuals speak to one another and the ways they speak in the official public sphere.

³⁹ *Apology*, 29d2–30b4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 30a2–4.

and death and to intrude into the life of the dead, for he suggests that if there is life after death, he would look forward to “examining and questioning people there.”⁴¹

Socrates’ refusal, indeed, to alter his way of speaking and acting in the face of death is precisely what disturbs the men of Athens. As Socrates eloquently and assiduously insists that he would not under any circumstances give up the practice of philosophy, they seem to become increasingly disruptive. Until for a fourth and final time, Socrates enjoins them not to disrupt him, but to listen: “Do not create a disturbance (*mē thorubeite*), men of Athens, but abide in my request to you not to disrupt (*mē thorubein*) what I say but to listen, for I think it will be to your benefit to listen. And I am about to say other things at which you will perhaps cry out (*boēsesthe*).”⁴² Socrates here is rightly concerned that what he is about to say will be too provocative for the men of Athens to receive at all, for he goes on to insist that “if you kill the sort of person I say I am, you will not harm me more than yourselves.”⁴³ And he goes yet further, claiming that this defense he is giving is not on his own behalf but for their sake – it is an attempt to defend them against themselves and their tendency to care for wealth and power more than the attempt to speak the truth and act justly. The outrageous nature of this claim is designed to provoke. It is meant to perform the precise function Socrates claims to be stationed in the city by the god as a gadfly to perform. This is how he characterizes his philosophical practice: “I never cease to awaken each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I settle down upon (*proskathizōn*) you.”⁴⁴ This philosophical practice of provocation is itself a political activity; it is performed for the sake of the city. Notice, however, the manner in which it is undertaken: it “never ceases;” it is concerned with “each and every one of you;” it is attempted “all day long” and “everywhere.” The practice of philosophy is not a delimited activity segregated to its own proper sphere – be that in public or private. Rather, it is a way of life, a deeply political way of life that attempts

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 41b5–6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 30c2–6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 30c7–9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 30e3–31a1.

always, with each person, everywhere to speak truth and act with a concern for justice.

This way of life, however, is disturbing and “settles upon” the city with great difficulty. Thus, the image of the gadfly is significant and evocative. It is significant insofar as it suggests the degree to which the practice of Socratic philosophy is distressing to the city. The term “*egeisthai*,” to arouse, awaken, stir up, suggests the provocative and subversive dimensions of Socrates’ relation to the city – dimensions that are, as we have heard, amplified in and through his defense in the *Apology*.⁴⁵ But the image of the gadfly rousing the city is evocative for a different reason, one that can only be felt if the term “*proskathizōn*,” “to settle upon,” is heard to resonate with a wider experience than that associated with the annoying practices of insects. To be sure, the term seems to be of limited scope: here it is said of a gadfly, in Aristotle, it is used with reference to the settling of bees into their hives.⁴⁶ But Aristotle also uses the word “*kathistasthai*,” which means “to settle down or be settled down,” to articulate the manner in which a *hexis*, or active condition, settles into the soul.⁴⁷ If we allow the connotations of the term Socrates uses – “*proskathizōn*,” which can mean to appoint, to settle, or, indeed, “to place in a certain condition,” – to call our attention to the manner in which his presence in the city is designed to provoke it in such a way that a certain active condition settles in on it, then the image of the gadfly, however seemingly ridiculous, can be heard to have substantive philosophical and indeed political significance.⁴⁸

The practice of Socratic philosophy becomes politically powerful insofar as it is capable of cultivating those excellences by which citizens might learn to speak the truth and act justly in all their encounters with

⁴⁵ ἐγείρω, v. Liddell and Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*.

⁴⁶ Aristotle, Balme, and Gotthelf, *Historia Animalium*, vols. III, 625a13–4.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of this understanding of how an active condition is cultivated in the soul, see Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, 125–6 and 149.

⁴⁸ Προσκαθίζω, v. in Liddell and Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*. Leibowitz suggests that the image of the gadfly “is a sign that Socrates is not completely serious when he claims to spend all of his time benefiting the city. . . .” See Leibowitz, *The Ironic Defense of Socrates*, 146. Colaïaco recognizes the trope of the gadfly as playfully serious, designed to provoke the men of Athens as the gadfly provokes the “noble horse” that is the city. For Colaïaco, “[t]he gadfly trope demonstrated that Socrates regarded philosophy as a radical activity.” See Colaïaco, *Socrates Against Athens*, 148–9.

one another.⁴⁹ This sort of settling into the character of the city is thematized by Socrates as a kind of “*proskeisthai*” – Socrates says that he was “placed (*proskeimenon*) by the god on the city as if it were a big and noble horse.”⁵⁰ To be placed on the city in this way is to be attached to the city not merely as its great provocateur but also as its most devoted citizen. The image of the gadfly itself seems to overemphasize the provocative dimension of the relationship, but if the connotations of “*proskeimenon*” are permitted to resonate with those of “*proskathizōn*,” a more nuanced and complex dynamic of relation can be felt to emerge between Socrates and the city. If “*proskathizōn*” suggests the manner in which Socrates’ ceaseless, ubiquitous, and assiduous attempts to awaken citizens to the question of justice is designed to cultivate in them an ability to live in a state of continuing provocation, then “*proskeimenon*” may be heard to suggest the degree to which such a provocative life is nevertheless a way of being devoted to the city and the citizens with whom one speaks and acts. When Socrates emphasizes the role of the god as positioning him in relation to the city in this way, he too underscores the extent to which the practice of philosophy is bound up with an attempt to care for the political life of the city. Socrates is, as he himself provocatively insists, “a gift from the god” (*tēn tou theou dosin*).⁵¹

The city’s inability to accept this gift or, indeed, even to recognize it as a gift, is eloquent testimony to the decisive failure of the practice of Socratic politics. Yet what fails with the majority of citizens succeeds on a different scale with the minority of “jurors” who voted to acquit him and in a more substantive way with one, namely, Plato, who took up writing in an attempt to perform on a literary level what Socrates attempted in concrete interpersonal practice. But before we take up the topographical practice of Platonic politics, let us return to the passage from which we began to consider the disruptive exchanges between Socrates and the men of Athens, for they can now be heard

⁴⁹ Villa nicely articulates the *political* importance of the Socratic attempt to cultivate an ethical sense in the citizens: “What the *Apology* reveals is Socrates’ intensive effort to cultivate an ethical sense in his fellow citizens which is partly distinct from the political life they share, which transcends custom and majority opinion without being reliant upon the transcendent.” Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, 29. If such an ethical sense took root, it would transform the very nature of the political community.

⁵⁰ *Apology*, 30e3–4.

⁵¹ *Apology*, 30e1.

as symptomatic of a citizenry unable to internalize the excellences of a philosophical politics.⁵² But these moments of disruption also articulate the extent to which the topology of Socratic politics refuses to address the many as a multitude but persistently extends into the private life of individual citizens, thus blurring the traditional boundary between public and private on which Ancient Greek politics depends.⁵³

Recall, then, that Socrates insists that if he had attempted to do political things, he would have died long ago and that the men of Athens ought not be angry with him if he speaks the truth. This claim led us onto the path we have thus far traversed, as we traced the moments of disruption in the text as symptoms of Athenian anger. This anger, as we have heard, emerges in response to a fundamental incapacity on the part of the citizens to allow the practice of philosophy to settle into their souls and thus to determine the life of the city itself. Correctly diagnosing this incapacity, Socrates recognizes that "... it is necessary for the one who really fights for justice to practice privately (*idiōteuein*), not publically (*dēmosieuein*), if one is to survive even a short time."⁵⁴ The juxtaposition between the private and public in this passage at once underscores and undermines the traditional distinction between the public as a space of politics and the private as the space for philosophy. It underscores the distinction insofar as it reasserts it as a dichotomy and identifies the private sphere as a space of refuge from the influence of the multitude. Yet the way Socrates articulates the juxtaposition undermines the distinction as well insofar as it identifies the private sphere as precisely the space in which the fight for justice may unfold.

Thus, we might echo Brann when she says that Socrates has "devised for himself a mode of being privately public (or the reverse)."⁵⁵ The topology of Socratic politics traverses the boundary between public and private by insisting that the private sphere too is a site, and perhaps a most decisive one, in which the question of justice is at stake. The vocabulary

⁵² *Apology*, 31d5–e4.

⁵³ See Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, I, 111.

⁵⁴ *Apology*, 31e2–32a3.

⁵⁵ See Brann, "The Offense of Socrates: A Re-Reading of Plato's *Apology*," 16. For evidence, Brann points to *Apology* 36c in which Socrates emphasizes that he went to each person privately in an attempt to convince each to care for the soul more than for possessions or wealth. But the passage under consideration could equally well have been appealed to for support.

Socrates uses here is that of a physician who practices in private (*idiōt-euein*) but whose care of the individual has an impact on the health and well-being of the wider community.⁵⁶ Although the primary site of the practice of Socratic philosophy may well be in relation to each individual encountered, this practice has a far-reaching impact on the public and is, at its very core, political. Arlene Saxonhouse, emphasizing the importance of free speech (*parrhēsia*) in the Socratic defense, puts it this way:

Socrates disingenuously ignores the inevitable blending of public and private. Speaking truth in the private sphere as if he were a father or brother to the young of the city, he brings the private world very much into the public sphere. The *parrhēsia* he practices in private becomes public as he urges his interlocutors not to care about what they had previously cared for (36c). In private, he unveils the public lies on which the citizens of Athens, attached to their past traditions and their ancient heroes, depend.⁵⁷

The subversive dimension of Socratic politics comes here to the fore as Saxonhouse rightly identifies the manner in which Socrates' refusal to abide by the strict distinction between public and private – even and especially as he evokes it – exposes his philosophical life to extreme political danger.

For Socrates, however, the truth is that the battle for justice is at once rooted in our private relationships with one another and animated by our attempts to live a common life in public concerned for justice. Thus Socrates insists: “Throughout my whole life, whenever I have done something in public, I appear as the same sort of man as I appear in private.”⁵⁸ To subvert the public–private dichotomy by refusing to appear differently in each is not to annihilate the difference between

⁵⁶ In the *Gorgias*, Socrates unfolds an elaborate analogy for Polus in which he suggests that politics is the care of the soul with justice as its restorative art, whereas the care of the body has medicine as its restorative art. See *Gorgias*, 464b–466a. In his discussion with Callicles in the *Gorgias*, Socrates uses *ιδιωτεύειν* and *δημοσιεύειν* explicitly in reference to the public and private practices of doctors; see 514d–e.

⁵⁷ Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, 122.

⁵⁸ *Apology*, 33a1–3. The distinction here is clearly between how Socrates appears in public and how he appears in private, but the passage is designed to subvert the dichotomy between the two as segregated spheres of appearing. Socrates appears the same way in both, a point that is emphasized frequently in the dialogue: 17c8–9, 29d6, 30a2–4, 30e7–31a1 and c7–8, and 38a3–5.

the private and the public altogether.⁵⁹ Rather, it is to recognize that when the *dichotomy* between the two functions in ways that segregate private from public speech and action, the battle for justice is already lost; for if our political realities are not determined by our most personal attempts to live a fulfilling life by weaving a concern for justice into our relationships with one another, the question of justice will lose its political power to animate the life of a community. The strict segregation of the private from the public opens a space in which the competing interests of those who claim to know what is just are permitted to determine the sphere of politics as an agonistic arena of domination and legitimation. By subverting the dichotomy between the private and public by appearing the same in both spheres, Socrates seeks to reinvigorate the political power of justice as an erotic principle capable of transforming human life in common, for justice is an ideal that, while remaining ultimately elusive, becomes politically powerful when it is permitted to animate the life of a community as a living question. To allow the question of justice to inform our relationships with one another in every sphere of human interaction is to begin not only to live a philosophical life but to practice Socratic politics.⁶⁰

THE TOPOGRAPHY OF PLATONIC POLITICS

But this attempt to cultivate the question of justice as an animating principle of human interaction seems indeed to have led Plato, in the wake of the death of Socrates, to take up writing in the way that he does.⁶¹ If the proper *topos* of Platonic writing is the life of Socrates, the

⁵⁹ Villa rightly recognizes that Socrates does not collapse the public/private distinction, nor does he substitute private interests for public concerns. See Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, 1–2.

⁶⁰ Arendt is correct to point out that although Socrates does not seek public office and practice public politics in that sense, neither does he retreat to the strictly private sphere; rather, he inhabits the marketplace, a space of *δόξα*, which Arendt suggests “means not only opinion but also splendor and fame.” See Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 80–1. This reinforces, however, the notion that Socrates was less concerned with parsing various spheres of appearance than he was with pursuing truth and justice in every context in which he found himself.

⁶¹ Guthrie unwittingly articulates the continuity between Socratic and Platonic politics when he writes, “To change men’s habits of thought requires personal contact, and for Plato, [Socrates’] heir, philosophy and *dialektikê* (which ordinarily meant conversation) were two

practice of Platonic politics can be understood as topography – the attempt to put the life of Socrates into written words in ways that awaken readers to the question of justice. If the dialogue between Socrates and the men of Athens was designed to provoke them to consider the truth of the things Socrates said and to show themselves as worthy of the title “jurors,” “*dikastai*,” once the verdict is pronounced, Plato has Socrates say and do things designed to provoke the readers of the dialogue to undertake the similar task of reflecting on the degree to which truth was spoken and justice served. In the last two speeches, Plato has Socrates reflect on the performance of his ultimate political failure. Here the fulcrum of the text undergoes a shift that lends insight into the nature of Platonic as opposed to Socratic politics, for once the verdict is pronounced, the central relationship around which the text is organized moves from that between Socrates and the men of Athens to that between the readers and the dramatic figures of “Socrates” and the “men of Athens” of which Plato writes. Thus, as Socrates reflects on the implications of the verdict and offers an assessment of the best sort of punishment for his activities, “Socrates” is made to stand for the practice of philosophy and the “men of Athens” for the city itself.

THE POLITICAL PLACE AND TIME OF PHILOSOPHY

In the second speech put into the mouth of Socrates, Plato requires his readers to reflect on the relationship between philosophy and politics first by having “Socrates” make specific suggestions about the proper place for philosophy and second by having him articulate its proper time. These themes have already been operating implicitly under the surface of the dialogue between Socrates and the men of Athens, finding voice in the disruptions we have traced to this point. Here, however, Socrates speaks boldly and directly about precisely how his practice of philosophy should be integrated into the life of the city.

Socrates addresses the proper place of philosophy in his famous suggestion that as an “*antitimēsis*” – the honor he deserves for practicing

names for the same thing.” See Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy IV: Plato: The Man and His Dialogues: Earlier Period*, 93.

philosophy in the way he has – he should receive “public maintenance in Prytaneion (*en prutaneīōi sitēseōs*).”⁶² The Prytaneion was a sacred Athenian site from the most ancient of times. Located at the very center of the city, it acted as a common hearth.⁶³ The site was sacred to Hestia, the goddess of the home and hearth, who is closely associated with Hermes.⁶⁴ If Socrates allowed his relationships with strangers to be guided by Hermes, the god of the threshold and boundaries, here Socrates insists that his relationship to the city itself should properly be rooted in a space sacred to Hestia.⁶⁵ The suggestion has often been dismissed as unserious, ironic, or morbidly provocative, but if the proposal is read not merely as addressed directly to the men of Athens but also as written for the sake of the readers of the dialogue, we might hear something of what it suggests about the practice of Platonic politics.⁶⁶ For as written, the proposed counterpenalty opens us to the question of the proper place of philosophy as a political activity.⁶⁷

⁶² *Apology*, 37a1–2. This translation gestures to Sterling Dow’s reminder that the phrase in Greek always omits the article and is comparable to the British idiom “in hall.” See Dow, “The Guardians, Socrates, and Board ‘In Prytaneion,’” 131n3. Reeve insists that Socrates does not unconditionally propose maintenance in Prytaneion as a counterpenalty given that Socrates articulates the suggestion as a consequent to the conditional statement: “If I must propose what I justly deserve, I propose maintenance in Prytaneion.” See *Apology*, 36e1–3. Still, however, Reeve recognizes that Socrates does claim that what he deserves is such maintenance. See Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology*, 171. Brickhouse and Smith emphasize the same point. Cf. Brickhouse and Smith, *The Trial and Execution of Socrates: Sources and Controversies*, 61n43.

⁶³ Schöll, “Die Speisung Im Prytaneion,” 15, 19 and 28–9. The older Prytaneion seems to have been a small house known as “οἰκίσκος.”

⁶⁴ In *Homeric Hymn* 29, “To Hestia,” Hestia together with Hermes is said to “dwell in the beautiful houses of humans, in friendship with one another, beautiful supports [of the house], and you attend to intelligence and youth.” See West, *Homeric Hymns*, 29.

⁶⁵ For a discussion of Socrates as guided by Hermes in his relations with foreigners, see Long, “Crisis of Community.”

⁶⁶ Riddell says the suggestion is “wholly ironical: there could be no serious expectation that such an offer would be accepted.” See Plato and Riddell, *The Apology of Plato*, xix. Guardini insists that Socrates “provokes his own death.” See Guardini, *The Death of Socrates*, 59. Stone refers to the suggestion as a “little joke” and says that in making it, Socrates “treats the charges, the court, and the city with scornful amusement.” Stone, *The Trial of Socrates*, 188–9.

⁶⁷ It is perhaps worth mentioning in this context that to have Socrates suggest a counterpenalty seems to have been a fictional construction of Plato himself insofar as such a claim can be made with any certainty. Xenophon, for his part, claims that Socrates did not offer an ἀντίρρησις at all. See Xenophon, “Socrates’ Defence,” 23.

By putting this suggestion into the mouth of Socrates, we are invited to consider the political implications of symbolically situating and nourishing the practice of philosophy at the very center of political life. Here the figure of Hestia is vital, for as Vernant has suggested, she becomes “the centre of the state and symbol of the unity of the citizens.”⁶⁸ Yet Hestia too is, like Socrates, an ambiguous figure, for although she represents the stability of the home and hearth, she is also closely associated with Hermes and so already suggests a degree of movement and transformation.⁶⁹ Something of this ambiguity is heard in the defense speech when Socrates insists that he speaks as a stranger in the court and yet also that he persuades the citizens to care for excellence “like a father or an elder brother” because “you are more near and kindred to me.”⁷⁰ The ambiguity is further amplified by the peculiar manner in which the private practice of Socratic philosophy is also a performance of public politics. The very word put into Socrates’ mouth when he suggests that he should receive “*sitēsis*” implicitly emphasizes the political nature of Socratic philosophy and points already, indeed, to the temporal duration of its practice. The honor of “*sitēsis*” was given to those citizens who were engaged in politics. It was, as Miller emphasizes, “conferred for the lifetime of a man who had performed some great service to his city.”⁷¹ This “punishment,” if it were to be levied, would

⁶⁸ Vernant, *Myth and Thought among the Greeks*, 151. James Colaiaico recognizes that the hearth of Hestia “symbolized the life of the polis,” and he articulates something of the significance of Socrates’ proposal: “He is announcing that philosophy deserves the highest place of honor in the city.” See Colaiaico, *Socrates Against Athens*, 174–5. As will be heard, however, this way of putting it does not capture the full symbolic significance of locating the practice of Socratic philosophy at the center of political life, for it is less about height than it is about roots.

⁶⁹ In the *Cratylus*, Socrates suggests that the name “Hestia,” “Ἑστία,” is associated with the Greek for “it is,” ἔστιν, which has two dimensions to it: οὐσία, or substance, which points to a certain ontological stability, and ὁσία, or thrust, which suggests a movement outward. See *Cratylus*, 401c–e. Vernant emphasizes the importance of the ambiguity in his essay on Hestia and Hermes. See Vernant, *Myth and Thought among the Greeks*, 127–75.

⁷⁰ Socrates suggests he speaks as a stranger at 17d3. He says he acts like a father and elder brother at 31b4–5 and that the citizens are nearer and more kindred at 30a4.

⁷¹ Miller, *The Prytaneion*, 7. Miller distinguishes between three classes of entertainment in Prytaneion, each of which “had a meal as a common feature, but differing according to the nature of the honoree and the length of time involved” (*Ibid.*, 4–5). Both the ξένια and the δεῖπνον were honors that involved one meal, while the former was given to foreigners and the later only to citizens. The στήσις, as mentioned, was a lifetime honor given to citizens, although apparently it also came in Athens to be given to foreigners as well. It seems, therefore, that the honor was not simply bestowed upon athletes, which Socrates explicitly

require the city to nourish the practice of philosophy over the course of a lifetime; it would thus, perhaps, begin to cultivate and sustain in the city itself a desire and ability to speak truth and stretch out toward the ideal of justice.⁷²

Such excellences are, of course, precisely those Socrates seeks to cultivate in each individual he encounters, and they are also the excellences to which we readers are exposed in our encounter with the Platonic text. The symbolic value of the suggestion that Socrates receive maintenance in Prytaneion hints at what is at stake politically for Plato, for if the ultimate failure of Socratic philosophy as a political activity is demonstrated by the inability of the men of Athens to become true jurors (*dikastai*), the incremental political success of Platonic philosophy depends on the possibility that each reader might in fact cultivate an ability to speak truth and discern the just in what is said. The hearth of Hestia is the proper place for such an intensely personal, private, and yet powerfully communal and public endeavor. Plato puts words in the mouth of the unnamed Athenian in the *Laws* that give voice to the political significance of the figure of Hestia. In the course of a discussion of how cases that involve the death penalty should be judged, the Athenian suggests that after the prosecutor and defendant speak and the judges have had the chance to question them thoroughly, the judges write down which of the things having been said are most pertinent and place the documents on the altar of Hestia. They repeat this the next day and, on the third day, after again considering the witnesses and testimony, “each judge should cast a sacred stone, swearing in the name of Hestia, to discern to the best of his power, the things that are just and

mentions, but more significantly for our purposes here, it was reserved for those citizens engaged in politics. Miller emphasizes this and insists as well that Socrates’ proposal that his proper “punishment” be στήσις is all the more preposterous because it implied a lifetime of public sustenance (*ibid.*, 7–8).

⁷² To demand of the city that it become philosophical is to do nothing other than what Socrates himself demands of each citizen. As Gregory Recco recognizes in his essay on Socratic citizenship, “In its most developed form, citizenship demands philosophy.” This involves knowing the good in a specific way: “To know the good means to make oneself responsible for it, to recognize it as something one must not only respect but also interpret and embody, in order for it to be . . . To be a citizen of a law-governed community in the most developed sense of these terms is nothing other than to do philosophy.” See Recco, “Citizen Socrates,” 168 and 186.

true (*pros tēs hestias eis dunamin ta dikaia kai alēthē krinein*).⁷³ The site where the power to discern the true and the just is both cultivated and performed is sacred to Hestia. Patricia Thompson puts it well when she writes:

Judges must find within themselves the honesty and integrity to administer justice before Hestia's altar. . . . Hestia represents the principle that addresses the ethics of those entrusted with passing judgment on others' ethical behavior. Hestia reminds judges to examine themselves if they would judge others.⁷⁴

The Prytaneion, sacred to Hestia, marks the place in which the excellences of political discernment are cultivated in the citizens and performed in the city. By having Socrates suggest that this is precisely the most proper place for him to be maintained and sustained, Plato articulates a powerful political point: the cultivation of those powers of discernment in each individual, when rooted in a concern for the well-being of the community of the whole, has the ability to transform the very nature of the city and of the politics practiced there. If, as Thompson says, "the hearth was a powerful, integrative social symbol," by suggesting, however provocatively and perhaps even preposterously, that the practice of Socratic philosophy might best be situated at such a powerful site of social integration, Plato invites us to imagine the practice of another politics, one rooted in the excellences of individuals endeavoring to speak truth and do just things in relation to and with one another.⁷⁵

This endeavor, however, as Plato also has Socrates emphasize, is not a trial of one day, but of many days, indeed, of an entire lifetime. Its

⁷³ *Laws*, IX, 855e1–6a7.

⁷⁴ Thompson, *The Accidental Theorist*, 90.

⁷⁵ The hearth of Hestia seems to have been a powerful site of integration in a more cosmological sense as well. It marked a terrestrial space that enabled relationships not only between humans but also between humans and the gods to be stabilized, determined, and integrated. See Vernant, *Myth and Thought among the Greeks*, 160. As a center of integration, however, the hearth of Hestia remained richly ambiguous such that it was not, as Antonopoulos emphasizes, permitted to consolidate into a masculine symbol of totality. See Antonopoulos, "The Double Meaning of Hestia: Gender, Spirituality, and Signification in Antiquity." To situate Socrates at such an ambiguous site is to identify his proper home as a space in which a concern for the most intimate commitments of each is held accountable to a larger cosmic ideal of justice. The hearth of Hestia is a most fitting site for the ongoing active work of Socratic idiosyncrasy.

proper time is amplified by Socrates just before the jurors vote to sentence him to death when, recognizing those listening will not believe him, he says: “the greatest good for humans is this: each day to make words concerning excellence (*hekastēs hēmeras peri aretēs tous logous poieisthai*) and the other things about which you hear me engaging in dialogue (*dialegomenou*) and examining thoroughly myself and others, for a life not inquired into is not a life for a human-being.”⁷⁶ The practice of Socratic philosophy is a kind of poetics of the everyday; it involves making words concerning excellence – *peri aretēs tous logous poieisthai*. The verb, *poieisthai*, is written in the present tense and the middle voice, suggesting that the poetic endeavor to make words concerning excellence is both an ongoing and a conjoint activity, one that receives further determination with the iteration of the present middle-passive participle, *dialegomenou*, being engaged together in ongoing dialogue. Yet however much the practice of philosophy must be recognized as dialogical poetics, Plato has Socrates emphasize its iterative dimension: it must be practiced “each day” – “*hekastēs hēmeras*” – so that it can begin to settle into each of us in ways that empower us, as the Athenian Stranger put it in the *Laws*, “to discern the things that are just and true.”⁷⁷ The practice of Platonic writing, the making of words concerning excellence – indeed, the poetic creation of dialogues that capture something of the “each day” in and through which a life becomes genuinely human – is but a continuation by another medium of the practice of Socratic political philosophy.

This, finally, can be heard most distinctly in the final speech Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates just after he has been condemned to death.⁷⁸ For by having Socrates reflect on his performance and insist

⁷⁶ *Apology*, 38a2–6.

⁷⁷ Socrates speaks about “each day,” as mentioned, at *Apology*, 38a3; the Athenian Stranger speaks of discerning things that are just and true, as mentioned, at *Laws*, IX, 856a7. At the beginning of the *Apology*, Plato has Socrates focus the attention of the men of Athens on whether what he says is just (18a). Thus, as Socrates there already invites them to reflect upon their capacity to judge, Plato enjoins us to thoroughly examine ours.

⁷⁸ Wilamowitz-Moellendorf suggests that this speech must be completely fictional because “No one can seriously believe that the people remained there and held themselves quietly, particularly because the sentence, which was so serious, was articulated with certainty.” Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Platon: Sein Leben Und Seine Werke*, I:124. Burnet disagrees, suggesting that the court would still have had to decide what to do with Socrates in the interim between the end of the trial and when the sacred ship to Apollo returned from

that the men of Athens reflect on theirs, Plato also asks us, his readers, to examine our lives. In considering his performance, Socrates says different things to different people. To those who voted to condemn him, he ascribes his failure to an unwillingness to act in shameful ways by seeking to avoid at all costs a death sentence when that would involve compromising on the manner in which he lived his political philosophy.⁷⁹ In having Socrates shift the responsibility to those who condemned him for being unable to hear the truth in what he said, Plato not only enjoins us to consider our own ability to attend to the truth of what was said, but also and more fundamentally, the Platonic text offers us an opportunity to practice discerning what is and is not said justly. Here, Platonic writing is felt to enjoin an active reading that has potential to transform the manner in which each of us thinks about our lives and relates to others. The political efficacy of Platonic writing, however, depends on the hermeneutical commitment of we readers not simply to determine the objective meaning of the text but to discern the just and true things having been written and to translate these things into our interpersonal and social lives. Platonic writing is a standing invitation to Socratic idiosyncrasy.

Plato has Socrates gesture to the possibility that there will be many like him who follow after him in the wake of his death. This is the context in which Socrates insists that those who voted to kill him did so to “avoid giving an account (*elenchon*) of your life, but as I say, precisely the opposite will result. For there will be more people who will call you to account (*hoi elenchontes*) . . .”⁸⁰ The others who Socrates claims to have held back to this point, those young people with whom he promises it will be more difficult to deal, must have included Plato himself who took up writing dialogues in the wake of the death of Socrates. These writings

Delos. See Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito*, 241. For his part, De Strycker splits the difference, saying that “something, not everything, is fictitious in the Third Speech of the *Apology* as it is published.” See Slings and De Strycker, *Plato’s Apology of Socrates*, 203. It is less important here to decide upon what is and is not fictitious in the speech than it is to emphasize the speech as a poetic attempt to make words in writing about excellence.

⁷⁹ *Apology*, 38c–39c.

⁸⁰ *Apology*, 39c6–d1. Obviously, the sense of *ἐλεγχος* here extends beyond the name for an abstract method for doing philosophy. For a discussion of the rich diversity of meanings of the term, see Scott, *Does Socrates Have a Method? Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato’s Dialogues and Beyond*.

themselves, in turn, must be recognized as being capable of awakening in generations of others the need to give an account of their lives and to call those they encounter to articulate a vision of themselves in the wider context of a life in common with others. The topography of Platonic politics has, then, led us here where the intimate relationship between the text and the reader is required to extend beyond the private sphere into the public space of communication and community.

It is no surprise, then, that in the end, Plato has Socrates address those who are rightly called *dikastai* because they have shown themselves capable of discerning the just in the things having been said. To them, Socrates speaks words of reassurance – my divine sign remained silent, a good person cannot be harmed in life or death – but he also reinforces the ongoing and inherent value of the practice of philosophy, which he would continue to pursue even in death, were that indeed possible. Socrates' unwillingness to bend his words even in death to any truth other than that dictated by philosophy itself indicts the practice of traditional politics that is predicated on the presumption that citizens remain incapable of discerning the just in the things they hear. This indictment is vindicated by the very action of the dialogue itself – by condemning Socrates to death, the citizens show themselves incapable of the philosophical politics Socrates practices.

Thus, in telling the story of Socrates' inability to move the men of Athens in the *Apology*, Plato gives voice to the topology of Socratic politics as conditioned by a fundamental limitation – it has shown itself to be incapable of persuading a multitude. But in coming face to face with this limitation, in allowing us to feel the compelling power of its failure, we learn something decisive about the politics of Platonic writing – it is able to reawaken in each new generation of readers the palpable question of what makes a life worth living, a question that itself already opens the possibility that a concern for justice might yet transform the reality of human being-together if we take hermeneutics up in earnest as a political activity.

6 THE POLITICS OF WRITING

If Hermes led us, in the *Protagoras*, to the proper site of Socratic politics, his son, Pan, maps for us, in the *Phaedrus*, the topography of Platonic politics. Named at the end of the dialogue as the god to whom Socrates and Phaedrus jointly pray for inward beauty and the riches of wisdom, Pan haunts the text from the beginning. He is a pastoral god, occupying spaces between cities, and thus already present as Socrates and Phaedrus make their way beyond the town walls.¹ He is also a god of madness whose presence is felt in Socrates' delineation of *erōs* as a kind of divine mania.² And he is, as Socrates says in the *Cratylus*, "either *logos* itself or the brother of *logos*," for he is "the double-natured son of Hermes, smooth in his upper parts, and rough and goatlike in the

¹ Herbig and Borgeaud emphasize the importance of Pan's connection with the area of southern Greece known as Arcadia. See Herbig, *Pan, Der Griechische Bocksgott*, 15–16. See too, Borgeaud, *Recherches Sur Le Dieu Pan*, 15. Boardman relates how the god became sacred to the Athenians, despite his origins in Arcadia; for the story is told that Pan accosted Pheidippides as he returned to Athens after running from Marathon during the Persian invasion to seek the help of Sparta. Pan was upset, it seems, because Pheidippides did not pay him proper homage on his way through Arcadia to Sparta. After this, the Athenians built a shrine to Pan on the north slope of the Acropolis. See Boardman, *The Great God Pan*, 28. The root of the name itself, *pa-*, does not, as Herbig reminds us, gesture to the idea of *pater*, *Vater*, and thus, *father*. See Herbig, *Pan, Der Griechische Bocksgott*, 16. Nor, indeed, does it seem to stem from the Greek "Πάν," meaning "all," as the *Homeric Hymn to Pan* suggests. See Teloh, *The Homeric Hymns*, XXIX.47–8, 84. Rather, as Boardman has suggested, his name "comes from the root *pa-*, a contracted form of *pa-on* meaning herdsman; the same root is found in the English word 'pasture.'" See Boardman, *The Great God Pan*, 26–7.

² *Phaedrus*, 245c. Dodds suggests the connection between Pan and madness when he writes: "Pan was believed to cause not only panic . . . but also fainting and collapse . . ." See Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, 95. For a more detailed discussion of the connection between Pan and panic, see Borgeaud, *Recherches Sur Le Dieu Pan*, 137–175.

ones below.”³ Pan thus embodies the tension endemic to the topology of Socratic politics in which the erotic attempt to speak toward the best is always bound intimately up with the thumotic desire to speak toward pleasure or power or gain.

If Pan stands for the practices of Socratic politics, he also uncovers the tectonic play among nature, madness, and language endemic to the topography of Platonic politics. In the dialogue itself, it is Theuth, simulacrum of Hermes, who, by announcing the discovery of writing as “a *pharmakon* for memory and wisdom,” locates the complex and disruptive epicenter of the political practice of Platonic writing.⁴ That epicenter lies at the site where the reader encounters the written text not, indeed, as orphaned and defenseless, repeating the same to all who question it, but as nurtured, provocative, and responsive to imaginative hermeneutical engagement.⁵

Pan and Theuth thus chart a course by which we might find our way more deeply into the topography of Platonic politics. But as always, the compass by which that map can be read is the living practice of Socratic speaking and the manner in which Socrates leads the soul of each person he encounters toward the true and the beautiful. Before we can follow the itinerary set out by Pan and Theuth, then, let us return to the place to which Hermes had led us in our discussion of the *Protagoras*, that is, to the site of the relationship between Socrates and the concrete individual with whom he is concerned; for the parallels between the *Protagoras* and the *Phaedrus* suggest the manner in which the topology of Socratic politics finds its deepest expression in the manner of Platonic writing.

The *Protagoras* and the *Phaedrus* both begin with the question: whence?, and they both end with a word of departure iterated in the first person plural. The dialogues are thus framed by a concern for the comings and goings of life that focus attention on the question of the course of the life of each individual. Although the vaguely

³ *Cratylus*, 408d1–4. The characterization of Pan as goatlike, τραγοειδής, in his lower parts points implicitly to the tragic (τραγικός) nature of the λόγος associated with the lower half of Pan, that is, with the half that comes in contact with the earth and the mortal world.

⁴ *Phaedrus*, 274e4–5. Derrida traces the connection between Theuth and Hermes through the Egyptian god of writing, Thoth. See Derrida, *Dissemination*, 84–93.

⁵ See *Phaedrus*, 275d–e. For a discussion of hermeneutical imagination, see [Chapter 5](#).

accusatory original question of the *Protagoras* – “Whence do you appear, Socrates?” – announces that the central theme of that dialogue will be the course of life of *both* Socrates and Hippocrates, the more intimate original question of the *Phaedrus* – “My friend Phaedrus, where are you going and where have you been?” – announces that the main focus of that dialogue will be the course of the life of Phaedrus himself.⁶ The *Protagoras*, as has been argued, thematizes the question of the course of a life in terms of the Greek word “*hōra*,” which points at once to that period of early manhood when a boy has reached puberty and to the rhythmic seasons of nature itself. The term appears in the *Phaedrus* as well, where it is heard first in this later register when Phaedrus mentions how pleasant it will be to wade through the stream “at this time of the year and at this hour (*tēnde tēn hōran tou etous te kai tēs hēmeras*).”⁷ It is heard again, however, first in Lysias’ speech and then in Socrates’ first speech, where it refers to that graceful period in a young man’s life that seems to have captured the ancient Greek imagination.⁸ Thus, in the *Phaedrus*, as in the *Protagoras*, the term connects the transformative time in the life of an individual with the natural rhythms of the seasons.⁹

Yet, given the way the natural background of the *Phaedrus* refuses, as Ferrari emphasizes, to remain in the background, the connection between the rhythm of time and the course of Phaedrus’ life is emphasized.¹⁰ If Phaedrus first calls our attention to the season of the year and

⁶ For a discussion of the opening sentence of the *Protagoras*, see Chapter 2. See *Protagoras*, 309a1, and *Phaedrus*, 227a1.

⁷ *Phaedrus*, 229a5–6.

⁸ The term appears twice in Lysias’ speech in close succession, where they refer to the youthful, although fleeting, good looks of the young beloved who is being persuaded to love the nonlover as opposed to the one animated by irrational *ἔρως* (*Phaedrus*, 234a2 and a8). In Socrates’ first speech, “*ῥᾶ*” appears in a context in which Socrates emphasizes how unpleasant it is to look into the face of one who is “past his prime (*οὐκ ἐν ῥᾷ*)” (*Phaedrus*, 240d7).

⁹ Another dimension of the temporality of the dialogue appears when Socrates cites Pindar’s *First Isthmian*, saying that he considers hearing how Lysias and Phaedrus passed the time “more important than business” (*Phaedrus*, 227b9–10). For a more detailed discussion of the role of Pindar’s poem in the *Phaedrus* with Christopher Moore, listen to Long, Christopher P., “Digital Dialogue 53: Pindar and Phaedrus” (http://www.cplong.org/digitaldialogue/digital_dialogue_53_pindar_and_the_phaedrus/).

¹⁰ See Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas*, 3. Although the course of Phaedrus’ life is at stake in the dialogue, he himself seems to be past the “prime of youth” to which the Greeks used the term “*ῥᾶ*” to refer. Yunis argues that Phaedrus is not a potential beloved for Socrates, but

even the rhythm of the day on which the dialogue occurs, and Socrates, at the very center of the dialogue, draws our attention to the singing of the cicadas as he and Phaedrus turn their attention to the critical question of how to write and speak well, then the organic structure of the dialogue itself as a written work begins to become discernible. The “logographic necessity” of the *Phaedrus* is determined by the soul of Phaedrus himself and the urgency of Socrates’ attempt to cultivate in Phaedrus a concern for the truth in his love of words, both spoken and written. The living *logos* that is the *Phaedrus*, however, is designed with provocative cunning. The apparent disunity of the text at once illustrates a way of reading capable of transforming the course of the life of an individual *and* invites an activity of reading that is capable of transforming the very life of the reader. The way Socrates enjoins Phaedrus to read the things Lysias wrote and the things Socrates himself then says in the wake of their collaborative reading must be permitted to inform the way we read the *Phaedrus*. If the dialogue itself demonstrates the transformative power of collaborative reading, a reading of the dialogue attuned to what the written text *shows* will uncover the transformative power of Platonic writing itself. Such a reading, however, will need to be pursued in two intimately interconnected registers: (1) the topological register attends to the things Socrates says to Phaedrus and the manner in which Socrates’ words turn Phaedrus toward the ideals of truth, beauty, and the good; (2) the topographical register attends to the ways Platonic writing in the *Phaedrus* cultivates in its readers an orientation toward these same ideals.¹¹

The *Phaedrus* shows Socrates undertaking a reading of Lysias with Phaedrus, a reading that begins to cultivate in Phaedrus himself the very capacities Socrates had sought and failed to cultivate in Protagoras in the *Protagoras*. If, as has been suggested, Socrates attempts to establish a community with Protagoras based on the hope that Protagoras was capable of speaking in his own voice by responding and listening

rather, Phaedrus is “an adult disciple of his art of discourse-composition.” See Yunis, *Plato: Phaedrus*, 9.

¹¹ Burger articulates well the connection between these two registers when she writes, “But Phaedrus is the appropriate interlocutor for illustrating the theoretical issue of the dialogue only because his own character and interests point beyond themselves to the Platonic defense of a philosophic art of writing, which emerges as the true mediation between human art and divine *eros*.” See Burger, *Plato’s Phaedrus*, 9.

together in pursuit of excellence, Socrates attempts to cultivate in Phaedrus precisely the same ability to speak in his own voice by listening to the things written and spoken and by responding together in pursuit of the truth. Although Socrates fails with Protagoras in the *Protagoras*, he seems to have been more successful with Phaedrus in the *Phaedrus*. This suggests that the proper analogy between the characters in the two dialogues is not between Socrates and Protagoras and Phaedrus respectively, but rather, the more insightful analogy is this: Socrates in the *Protagoras* is to Hippocrates and Protagoras as Socrates in the *Phaedrus* is to Phaedrus and Lysias. On this analogy, Socrates is positioned between the individual with whom he is concerned and a rhetorician whose interest in words is animated more by a concern for fame and influence than truth. Reading these two dialogues from the perspective of Socrates' effect on the individual with whom he is primarily concerned brings into focus how successful Socrates is as an educator. This success is signaled by the final word of both dialogues. The significance of “*apēimen*” – “we left” – in the *Protagoras* has already been mentioned: it suggests that Socrates left with Hippocrates and thus that he succeeded in dissuading him from entering into close association with Protagoras.¹² In the *Phaedrus*, the final word “*Iōmen*” – “let us go” – sets Socrates and Phaedrus together on a path back to the city jointly committed to bringing the message to two influential speakers – Isocrates and Lysias – that they ought to allow the things they say and write to be guided by a deep and abiding friendship with wisdom.¹³

But if the *Protagoras* leaves undetermined the further education of Hippocrates, the *Phaedrus* illustrates the transformative power of Socratic teaching. In the *Protagoras*, the presence of Protagoras himself shifted the focus of the dialogue from the relationship between Socrates and Hippocrates to that between Socrates and Protagoras; and if their discussion remained always animated by Socrates' own attempt to discern the effect an association with Protagoras would have on the soul of Hippocrates, still the dialogue concentrated on the kind of teacher Protagoras is as opposed to the kind of teacher Socrates might be. In the *Phaedrus*, however, the absence of the physical presence of

¹² See [Chapter 2](#).

¹³ *Phaedrus*, 279a1–c6.

Lysias forces Phaedrus to become the “father” of the speech Lysias has written.¹⁴ This authorial absence has a twofold significance: first, it invites Phaedrus to take ownership of the text in a way that encourages him to defend his own superficial judgment of its “beauty.”¹⁵ Second, however, it affords Socrates the opportunity to engage in a kind of text seminar with Phaedrus in which he performs a close reading of Lysias’ text even as he introduces other “texts” for their consideration in the form of verbal speeches – Socrates’ own speech on behalf of the lying lover and his palinode of that speech. The presence of Lysias’ text *as written* opens a space between author and reader into which Socrates enters. Occupying this space, Socrates seeks to lead Phaedrus toward the beautiful philosophical rhetoric of which Socrates himself had spoken with such eloquence in the *Gorgias*.¹⁶

The topology of Socratic politics in the *Phaedrus* is marked, then, by the transformative power of collaborative reading.¹⁷ The familiar greeting with which the dialogue begins and the emphasis placed on Socrates’ intimate understanding of who Phaedrus is as a person – namely, one who loves to hear, learn, and memorize speeches – only become necessary details of the dialogue if we recognize that neither the content of Lysias’ speech nor the practices of Lysian rhetoric set the dialogue on its way. Rather, the central concern of the dialogue is the course of the life of Phaedrus himself and the manner in which he will continue to put his love of *logoi* into practice. Socrates literally interrupts Phaedrus on his way to memorize what he considers to be a beautiful, great, and abundant speech.¹⁸ The dialogue, then, is divided into two parts that belong organically together: the first part performs a collaborative reading of Lysias’ text, a reading that involves both reconstruction and critique. The second part involves a reflection on the nature of beautiful speaking

¹⁴ See *Phaedrus*, 275e.

¹⁵ *Phaedrus*, 227e5.

¹⁶ See Chapter 3 and *Gorgias*, 503a7. McCoy recognizes this significance of the *Phaedrus* in this regard when she writes, “For the first time in the dialogues, we have a clearly articulated account of rhetoric in its positive sense.” See McCoy, *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists*, 167.

¹⁷ Benardete gestures to the significance of collaborative reading when he writes, “This shared experience would have to displace Lysias and present to them a virtual image of Lysias if it were going to be significantly different from a solitary reading.” See Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy*, 108–10.

¹⁸ See *Phaedrus*, 234e2–3.

and writing.¹⁹ But what brings these two parts together is the course of the life of Phaedrus himself.

THE EDUCATION OF PHAEDRUS

The collaborative reading of Lysias Socrates undertakes with Phaedrus illustrates the transformative power of Socratic education. This can be clearly discerned by tracing the trajectory of the transformation Phaedrus undergoes in the course of the *Phaedrus*. This course of education, although it takes place outside the city walls, begins in the city and returns to it. It is political in the same spirit in which Socrates himself claimed, in the *Gorgias*, to “attempt the political art truly.”²⁰ In the *Gorgias*, as we heard, the art of politics involved the attempt to speak toward the best with those we encounter. Indeed, as a *technē*, Socratic politics held much in common with doctoring, for it involves the ability to discern the nature of each person on whom it attends, acting from an understanding of what is responsible for the current condition of that individual, and “it has a *logos* to give about these things.”²¹ In the *Phaedrus*, we see the practice of Socratic politics at work on an individual. Phaedrus himself, at a decisive point in his own education in the dialogue, articulates the deep connection between the art of speaking well and that of doctoring. When Socrates presents Phaedrus with the hypothetical situation in which a doctor claims both to know how to apply treatments to induce certain effects in bodies and to be able to transmit this knowledge to others, Phaedrus rightly insists that the doctor will also need to know “to whom it is necessary to do these things and when, and to what extent.”²² This recognition marks an important

¹⁹ Charles Griswold has called such a reflection on speaking and writing a second-order “talk about talk,” which itself is already operating in Socrates’ first speech. See Griswold, *Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus*, 58.

²⁰ *Gorgias*, 521d6–e2; see [Chapter 3](#). Bentley suggests that the *Phaedrus* argues that politics must be practiced outside of institutions. He understands the speeches in the first half of the dialogue as political parables and he recognizes the dialogue as challenging our understanding of political space, insisting that interpersonal relations are political. See Bentley, “On Plato’s *Phaedrus*: Politics Beyond the City Walls,” 231.

²¹ *Gorgias*, 501a1–3.

²² *Phaedrus*, 268b6–7.

moment in the education of Phaedrus insofar as it indicates that he is beginning to understand that the sort of *technē* associated with doctoring, and thus also with speaking beautifully – that is, politics – is not reducible to a set of technical skills haphazardly deployed. A speech cannot simply be memorized and brought to bear on any arbitrary individual or group. Rather, just as with doctoring, the one practicing politics truly must attend carefully to the concrete life of the individual with whom one is engaged. Phaedrus is able to realize this only because Socrates has conveyed this understanding of *technē* to him in the course of the dialogue.

The Phaedrus Socrates interrupts on the path leading beyond the city walls is a man who, having listened for a long time – repeatedly it seems – to Lysias give a clever but poorly organized speech, is intent on following the orders of his doctor, Acumenus.²³ Already in Phaedrus' response to the initial question whither and whence, we learn something of the person he is and sense already the person he might become. He is a man who so loves *logoi* that even after listening at length, he still desires to commit the things said and written to memory. He is also a man who follows the instructions of worthy authorities – concerning health, Acumenus, but concerning speeches, first Lysias and then, to his credit, Socrates himself.²⁴ Already in this first response to Socrates, a connection between the love of speeches and a desire for physical health is emphasized and Phaedrus recognizes that his well-being depends on both. This recognition, however implicit, prepares the ground for Socratic teaching, which will seek to connect the arts of speaking and writing with the art of doctoring in ways that illustrate that the former are as critical to the well-being of the soul as the latter is to the well-being of the body. Thus, insofar as he has already a highly cultivated erotic relationship to *logoi* and a willingness to listen to worthy authorities, Phaedrus is, as many have noted, a promising student.²⁵ Yet, insofar as

²³ *Phaedrus*, 227a1–b1.

²⁴ Yunis rightly suggests that “Ph. Follows recognized experts, the speechwriter Lysias and the physician Acumenus, and politely includes S. in his circle of sophisticated friends.” See Yunis, *Plato: Phaedrus*, 86.

²⁵ Hackforth takes issue with Robin, who claims that Phaedrus is a “fervent partisan of the Sophists, totally incapable of the same communion with the thinking of Socrates.” See Plato, *Platon*, xiii. Hackforth thinks these last words go too far, suggesting that Phaedrus is “plainly an intelligent person, alive to the movement of thought in his day” and that Phaedrus is

he shows no ability to critically reflect on the *logoi* he encounters and remains overly enthralled with the superficial appearance of excellence regarding the speaking and writing of words, Phaedrus has much to learn. Precisely what Phaedrus learns in the course of the dialogue is significant. In the end, Phaedrus shows himself capable of orienting his own words toward the truth and of discerning what is beautiful in the words of others – that is, he has begun to establish a friendship with wisdom. But more important for our attempt to delineate the practice of Socratic political education and to discern the power of Platonic political writing is the manner in which the text illustrates how Socrates leads Phaedrus to this friendship.

Thus, in what follows, we will trace the trajectory of Socratic teaching in the *Phaedrus* by marking three moments in the dialogue at which the course of the life of Phaedrus shows itself to be shifting. First, to establish the baseline position from which Phaedrus begins, it will be important to attend to his initial enthusiasm for the speech he has obtained from Lysias. Second, we will focus on the way Phaedrus responds to Socrates' first speech to illustrate the degree to which Phaedrus has begun already to become more critically reflective. Third, after Socrates' palinode, he and Phaedrus engage in a collaborative reading of specific aspects of the Lysian text. Here, as the discussion shifts from the performance of speeches to the performance of a critical, collaborative reading designed to delineate for Phaedrus what it might mean to speak and write well, the transformation of Phaedrus is felt most acutely, for where he was passive, accepting, and easily enthralled by the superficial beauty of words, Phaedrus now shows himself capable of understanding the deep connection between the true art of speaking (technology) and the erotic engagement with truth (philosophy).

"converted to philosophy in the end." See Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedrus*, 13. Ferrari understands Phaedrus as an "intellectual impresario" who is just beginning to practice an art of his own – an art analogous to that of a literary journalist or publisher. See Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas*, 4–9. Griswold considers Phaedrus a fitting interlocutor for Socrates because, although deficient in self-knowledge, Phaedrus loves speeches and is willing to listen to those he respects. See Griswold, *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, 18–25. Nussbaum, for her part, calls Phaedrus "the brilliant pupil of Socrates." See Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 232. A strong voice of dissent about Phaedrus is that of Zdravko Planinc, who sees Phaedrus as "a comic figure" and "a wooden actor" in the drama and who "cannot imagine why" so many have come to consider Phaedrus a promising student. See "Homeric Imagery in Plato's *Phaedrus*," 137.

ENTHUSIASM

Having completed his recital of Lysias' speech, Phaedrus is beside himself with enthusiasm. He cannot hold back his own opinion of it: "How does the *logos* appear to you, Socrates? Was it not extraordinarily (*hyperphuōs*) said, both with respect to its phrasing and in other respects?"²⁶ Phaedrus' excessive enthusiasm expresses itself in the way he praises the excessive nature of Lysias' style of expression. The speech is said to have been said in an extraordinary way, the term "*hyperphuōs*" connoting something that is overgrown or enormous, even if here it means what is exceedingly marvelous.²⁷ Socrates quickly and playfully embraces the language of excess, responding to the adverb Phaedrus used with an adverb of his own:

Indeed, [it was said] miraculously (*daimoniōs*), my friend, with the result that it astounded me. And I suffered this because of you, Phaedrus, for as I gazed upon you, you seemed to me set aglow by the speech as you read (*ganusthai hupo tou logou metaxu anagignōskōn*).²⁸

By proliferating the language of excess here, Socrates at once subtly opens the question of authorial authority, calls attention to the affective connection between him and Phaedrus, and emphasizes the manner in which Phaedrus himself seemed transformed by the activity of reading. By introducing the vocabulary of the daimonic, Socrates suggests already that Phaedrus is somehow possessed and out of his mind, thus anticipating the discussion of erotic madness that will be central to the palinode he will be compelled by his own daimonion to deliver.²⁹

²⁶ *Phaedrus*, 234c6–d1.

²⁷ ὑπερφυῶς, adv. Liddell and Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*. The term also carries the negative sense of what is strange or monstrous. Thus already with this description of the things written by Lysias, the question of their propriety and proportion is raised.

²⁸ *Phaedrus*, 234d1–4. De Vries has suggested that the adverb "δαμονίως" indicates that "Phaedrus is corrected . . . his ὑπερφυῶς was not strong enough an expression." See Vries, *A Commentary on the Phaedrus of Plato*, 71.

²⁹ For the appearance of Socrates' δαίμονιον, see *Phaedrus*, 242b9; for the discussion of divine madness, see 244a–5a and, in particular, the fourth kind of madness discussed at 249d–250c, where Socrates speaks specifically about the erotic madness of the lover of beauty. There the vibrant imagery of brilliance resonates with that found in this passage, for there Socrates speaks of a "beauty brilliant to see" at 250b5–6.

Shifting from the topological to the topographical perspective, the exchange can be read as crafted in such a way that we readers are enjoined to consider the transformative possibilities of the activity of reading itself: Plato juxtaposed the adverbs in a way that heightens our awareness of the problem of authority, he gestures to the theme of madness that will become central later in the text, and he introduces as an explicit concern the very practice of reading itself. More specifically, Plato calls our attention to the dangers of becoming so caught up in the reading of a text that one loses the ability to reflect critically on its relation to the truth.³⁰ The topology of Socratic politics and the topography of Platonic politics are bound so tightly together here as elsewhere in the dialogues that only by reading the text in a double register – topologically and topographically – can we disentangle them just enough to discern the peculiar power of each.

Returning, then, to the topological perspective, Socrates responds in a way that calls Phaedrus to account for the affective dimensions of his reading. Socrates speaks first about how he himself was affected by the reading; but he then goes on to emphasize that it was Phaedrus – and specifically the power of his brilliant appearance – that so astounded him.³¹ Thus, Socrates shifts the focus from the text to the person, emphasizing in particular the relational dynamic between him and Phaedrus. Whatever else the text *says*, what it has primarily *done* is bring the two of them together. This intentional focus on the dynamic of the relationship between those engaged in dialogue is a core feature of Socratic pedagogy. He remains always concerned for and with the individual with whom he speaks, and everything he says is informed by a deep attunement to the nature of that individual.

The nature of Phaedrus, it seems, however, is to be attuned more to style and appearance than to the truth. Already in his initial exuberance, we heard how enthralled Phaedrus is with the style of Lysias' speech. He goes on to ask Socrates if he thinks anyone among the Greeks could

³⁰ This distancing strategy endemic to Platonic writing occurs throughout the dialogues. For a discussion of how this strategy plays itself out in the *Symposium* and *Republic*, see Long, "Is There Method in This Madness? Context, Play and Laughter in Plato's *Symposium* and *Republic*."

³¹ It has been frequently noted that in using the term "γάνυσθαι" – to brighten up – here, Socrates (and Plato) allude to Phaedrus' name, which means beaming or radiant. See, for example, Vries, *A Commentary on the Phaedrus of Plato*, 71. And: Yunis, *Plato: Phaedrus*, 105.

speak “more greatly or more fully concerning these things (*meizō kai pleiō peri tou autou pragmatos*).”³² When Socrates begins to criticize both the substance of the speech and its style, suggesting that they should consider if the author said what ought to have been said and insisting that the speech was extravagant, immature and repetitive, Phaedrus gets upset. This is how he responds:

You talk nonsense, Socrates. That very thing [namely, that the author has said what he ought to have said] is just what is so great about the speech: it has left out nothing of what is worth saying of the subject, with the result that no one would ever be able to speak of these things having been said more fully and more worthily (*pleiō kai pleionos axia*).³³

Here Phaedrus is hyperbolic, categorical, and formulaic. His judgment lacks nuance, and his insistence that no one *ever* would be able to improve on it is almost immediately proven wrong by the performance of Socrates’ own first speech. The formulation “*pleiō kai pleionos axia*” is consistent with the traditional standard of excellence for rhetoric, and it is meant to be a claim concerning both the quality and the quantity of the speech.³⁴ However, just as his first utterance of praise for the speech shows Phaedrus to be more interested in its style of expression than the content of its argument, here he seems to be parroting a standard of excellence that prizes the quality of completeness in quantitative terms.

The speech has said neither too much nor too little. This quantitative concern is emphasized when Phaedrus determines how he will judge the speech Socrates proposes to give against that of Lysias by insisting that Socrates must offer different points that are “better and not fewer.”³⁵ Socrates then attempts to turn Phaedrus’ attention to more qualitative concerns by arguing that he must be permitted to make some of the more obvious points Lysias himself has made; that is, not all Socrates’ points will be different, but they will be presented more effectively. But

³² *Phaedrus*, 234e2–3.

³³ *Phaedrus*, 235b1–4.

³⁴ Yunis, *Plato: Phaedrus*, 106–7. De Vries suggests that “καὶ πλείω” is typical of Phaedrus.” See Vries, *A Commentary on the Phaedrus of Plato*, 72. The word “πλείω” can connote what is full in the sense of being complete, but it has a decidedly quantitative connotation, suggesting that Phaedrus has fundamentally a quantitative understanding of excellence in speaking.

³⁵ *Phaedrus*, 235d5.

even after Phaedrus grants that Socrates can assume the same point Lysias had – that the lover is more mad than the nonlover – he reiterates, now for the third time, the formulation by which he measures excellence, saying: “but for the rest, when you say different things, more fully and more worthily (*pleiō kai pleionos axia*), your statue will stand beside the offering of the Cypselids at Olympia.”³⁶ The honor, which, as Yunis has emphasized, would stand beside “the grandeur of an archaic tyrant in the very heart of the Hellenic competitive world,” would be bestowed by Phaedrus on the basis of this repeated formulation that understands excellence in peculiarly quantitative terms.

From a topographical perspective, the repetition of the formulation, and particularly the word “*pleiō*,” amplifies for the reader the concern Phaedrus has for completeness – fullness in the sense of the proper number of arguments, neither too few nor too many. Indeed, the shift from what is “*meizō kai pleiō*” – “more greatly and more fully” at 234e2–3 to what is “*pleiō kai pleionos axia*” – “more fully and more worthily” at 235b4 and again at 236b2 allows the quantitative value of excellence to resonate more acutely with the reader even as the question of what makes something worthy is also raised.³⁷ From a topological perspective, however, Phaedrus continues to measure worth in terms of completeness. His initial response to Socrates’ first speech illustrates this even as it demonstrates a growing capacity for critique.

CRITIQUE

The enthusiasm with which Phaedrus responds to his own reading of Lysias contrasts with the far more critical manner in which he receives

³⁶ *Phaedrus*, 236b2–4. Phaedrus says “*πλείω*,” three times (234e3, 235b4, 236b2), and he appeals to the importance of the number of arguments once (235d5) in this short interlude.

³⁷ This point stands even if Hackforth is followed in reading “*ἀμείνω*,” or “better,” the comparative of *ἀγαθός*, good, for “*μείζω*,” or “greater,” the comparative of *μέγας*, big/larger/great. See Hackforth, *Plato’s Phaedrus*, 32. On that reading, the shift from the qualitative “better” to the repetition of the more quantitatively inflected “*πλείω και πλείονος ἄξια*” is perhaps more pronounced. However, reading “*μείζω*” at 234e2 (as does Verdenius and, following him, De Vries) amplifies the quantitative perspective from the start by having Phaedrus begin with a term bearing deep quantitative connotations. See Verdenius, “Notes on Plato’s ‘Phaedrus,’” 272. On either reading, the quantitative conception of excellence is heard to be the central value by which Phaedrus evaluates speeches early in the dialogue.

Socrates' first speech. His criticism does not yet concern the substantive issues Socrates himself identifies as problematic about his speech – namely, that it offends Eros by speaking of love as if it were simply shameful because it involves an ignoble madness. Rather, Phaedrus continues to demonstrate a concern for quantity, but now it is not merely the number of arguments Socrates brings to bear, but Phaedrus is more specifically concerned with the proper proportion of the speech as a whole. In the speech itself, Socrates slyly takes on the voice, not of a nonlover, but of a lying lover – that is, of an erotic person concealing his erotic desires – in order to illustrate the dangers endemic to the “friendship of a lover.”³⁸ The speech ends with a rhetorical flourish that captures the core of the argument: “as wolves love sheep, so lovers befriend youths.”³⁹ But Phaedrus is surprised at this conclusion: “But I thought that you were at the midpoint of it, and that you were about to say an equal number of things about the non-lover, that it is necessary to gratify him more than the other, and saying, on the contrary, however many good things he has. Why are you stopping?”⁴⁰

This concern for the whole of the speech already marks an important transition, for Phaedrus is beginning to think of speeches in terms of organic wholes, and, thus, in the very terms Socrates will develop in his more focused discussion of the nature of speaking and writing well.⁴¹ Here the abstract desire for completeness has become a concrete concern for the proportionality of the speech itself. Phaedrus thus shows himself to be attuned to the organizing spirit of the *logos* even if he does not yet recognize that it is not simply the life of the speech that is at stake, but also the life of the very person to whom the speech is directed. Even before the speech is spoken, Socrates has begun to shift Phaedrus'

³⁸ *Phaedrus*, 241c7. Griswold calls him not a “lying lover” but a “concealed lover” to reveal the degree to which Socrates' (alleged) nonlover differs from Lysias' nonlover, who is never thematized as a crafty lover. See Griswold, *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, 57–61. Bentley captures the nature of the speaker in Socrates' first speech when he calls him a “lying lover” and says he is “capable of something the Lysian lover is not: self-reflection. See Bentley, “On Plato's *Phaedrus*: Politics Beyond the City Walls,” 238.

³⁹ *Phaedrus*, 241d1. Yunis suggests that this conclusion “follows the form of a traditional didactic fable by closing with a proverb. . . .” In so doing, Socrates “enacts the loss of control under divine influence that he anticipated (238c5–d6), and thus provides an apt excuse for ending the speech here.” See Yunis, *Plato: Phaedrus*, 120.

⁴⁰ *Phaedrus*, 241d4–6.

⁴¹ *Phaedrus*, 264c3–6.

attention to what might be called the intentionality of the speech, that is, to the person to whom the words are addressed. Before the speech begins, Socrates insists, “I will speak with my head covered (*egkalyptamenos*), in order that I might rush through the speech as quickly as possible, and by not looking at you, avoid faltering on account of shame.”⁴² This statement, which comes at the end of a playful interaction in which Phaedrus “compels” Socrates to give the speech by threatening to withhold all future speeches from him, establishes a barrier between Socrates and Phaedrus. The performance of this action and the explanation Socrates gives have a twofold pedagogical design.⁴³ First, it calls Phaedrus’ attention to the relational dynamic between them, and thus invites Phaedrus to be on guard against the speech. Second, it introduces a different kind of propriety into their discussion of speeches. By suggesting the possibility that the things about to be said might be shameful, Socrates shifts the focus from quantitative proportionality to qualitative propriety. He thus begins to turn Phaedrus toward the question of the good and the just.

What Socrates does with Phaedrus, however, Plato attempts to do with us, albeit in a different register. The playful and endearing way Socrates’ first speech is introduced calls our attention as readers to the nature of the relationship between Socrates and Phaedrus. It invites us to consider the role of compulsion in their relationship and the manner in which Phaedrus is able to use Socrates’ own erotic connection to speeches to playfully compel him to do something shameful. Most importantly, the playful manner in which this first speech is framed calls our attention to the power of words to move people to do things that might be out of character. The text is written in a way that

⁴² *Phaedrus*, 237a4–5. For a discussion of the importance of the term “ἐγκαλυπόμενος” in the *Phaedo*, see [Chapter 4](#).

⁴³ Griswold recognizes that “Socrates’ self-concealment is actually a rather complicated gesture.” See Griswold, *Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus*, 56. First it is designed to hold a mirror to Phaedrus to allow him to see himself as saying shameful things in repeating Lysias’ speech. Second, it performs something Socrates wants Phaedrus to understand about good rhetoric: that what is being said must be oriented toward the person to whom it is said. A third element is implied later by Griswold, namely, that by covering his head, Socrates makes it clear that he is not speaking in his own voice. Contrast this to the palinode, which, although it is ascribed to Stesichorus, is nevertheless owned by Socrates in a different way. Griswold puts it this way: “Underneath the various guises Socrates has assumed, Stesichorean and otherwise, he is the discursive erotician par excellence” (*ibid.*, 136).

encourages the reader to attend to the manner in which people do things with words. Although the compulsion here is playful, the playfulness of it stimulates the hermeneutic imagination: it opens the possibility that Socrates might be read as allowing himself to be “compelled” in order to illustrate the compulsive nature of words and the need to be on guard against what we are doing with words and what words are capable of doing to us. The playful character of the discussion allows us to discern the play of compulsion in a pedagogical context in which serious compulsion would be out of place.⁴⁴

Thus, Plato has Socrates ask the Muses to take possession of him. Then, having written a speech that shows Socrates to be possessed, Plato emphasizes what words are capable of doing by having Socrates interrupt his speech to comment on this very enthusiasm – his “*theion pathos*.”⁴⁵ The comment is meant for Phaedrus, for he has allowed his own enthusiasm for the speech Lysias wrote to carry him away. But on a topographical level, the comment breaks up an eloquently written speech precisely at the moment when it touches on how the desire for the pleasant can overpower our judgment concerning what is right. The break comes just as Socrates playfully connects the word for love, *erōs*, with the word for bodily strength, *rhōmē*. Plato puts the following into the mouth of Socrates:

For the desire (*epithumia*) without *logos* that leads us toward the pleasure of beauty and overpowers the judgment concerning what is right, and that is victorious in leading us toward the beauty of the body when it is vigorously strengthened (*errōmenōs rhōstheisa*), talking its name from this very strength (*tēs rhōmēs*), is called love (*erōs*).⁴⁶

⁴⁴ A similar dynamic is at play, so to speak, in the *Republic*, when the slave of Polemarchus takes hold of Socrates’ cloak and orders him and Glaucon, on behalf of Polemarchus, to wait. The play of compulsion is then amplified in the conversation between Polemarchus and Socrates, even as Socrates resolves to go with Polemarchus to his home. See *Republic*, 327b1–8b3. For a discussion of this playful coercion and the manner in which it is part of a distancing strategy on the part of Plato, see Long, “Is There Method in This Madness? Context, Play and Laughter in Plato’s *Symposium* and *Republic*,” 183–5. For a discussion of how Socrates establishes community by turning force into persuasion, see Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues*, 322.

⁴⁵ *Phaedrus*, 238c5–6.

⁴⁶ *Phaedrus*, 238b6–c4.

The passage includes a cascade of participles modifying “*epithumia*,” or desire, that concludes with a pithy etymological claim: this vigorously strengthened desire takes its name from strength itself and is called “*erōs*.” The interplay of phonemes associated with words for strength and love – “*errōmenōs rhōstheisa*,” “*rhōmēs*,” “*erōs*” – is striking and seductive at once. The seduction of it, however, is mitigated by the abrupt interruption by which Socrates comments on his own enthusiasm. By breaking the rhythm of the speech at this moment, Plato calls attention to the important philosophical question that lies beneath and finds expression in the play of words for strength and love. The desire that overpowers judgment is itself at play in the interplay between Phaedrus and Socrates that introduces this speech that will itself require a palinode.

Indeed, the etymology here resonates with that found in the palinode when Socrates considers the meaning of madness (*manian*). There, as here, Socrates appeals to the etymology of a term in order to reveal, as Yunis points out, “a layer of meaning about the activity in question.”⁴⁷ In the palinode, when Socrates is trying to establish a more positive understanding of madness, Plato has him say:

It is worth bearing witness that those of long ago who posited the names of things also thought madness (*manian*) was neither shameful nor disgraceful; for they would not have connected the word itself with the most beautiful art, the one that discerns the future, calling it “*manikēs*” [the mad art].⁴⁸

The direction toward which Socrates is trying to point as he rehabilitates the notion of madness here becomes discernible in a third etymology to which he appeals in the palinode at 249e3. There Socrates speaks of a kind of madness that overcomes someone who sees beauty in this world and is reminded of true beauty.

Of all the ways of being possessed (*enthousiaseōn*) this reveals itself to be the best (*aristē*) and from the best, both for the one who has it and for the one who shares in it; and it is because he participates in

⁴⁷ Yunis, *Plato*: Phaedrus, 114.

⁴⁸ *Phaedrus*, 244b5–c5.

this madness that the one who loves the beautiful is called a lover (*ho erōn tōn kalōn erastēs*).⁴⁹

As Verdenius has suggested, this playful etymology derives “*erastēs*” from “*aristē*” and “*erōn*.”⁵⁰ If the lover is the one who loves the best, then to be possessed by love is to be oriented toward the best in a way that is good for the lover and the beloved both. The emphasis Plato has Socrates place on both partners of the erotic relationship reinforces the importance of the relation between them even as it directs their common erotic concern toward a third, namely, the best. Thus, in these three moments of etymological play, Plato puts words into the mouth of Socrates that articulate a transformed understanding of the nature of *erōs* itself. The etymologies chart a path from the strength of an irrational desire for the pleasures associated with physical beauty through a rehabilitated understanding of madness connected with the ability to discern the future, ultimately to an understanding of *erōs* as being possessed by a desire for the best.⁵¹

The ambiguity of the word “*kalōn*” at 249e4 is philosophically significant: morphologically, it can be either masculine or neuter, and thus it might be read as pointing *at once* to the beauty of the young man to whom the speech is addressed and also to the look of beauty itself.⁵² The philosophical significance of this ambiguity comes into sharpest

⁴⁹ *Phaedrus*, 249e1–4.

⁵⁰ Verdenius, “Der Begriff Der Mania in Platons *Phaidros*,” 147.

⁵¹ David White amplifies the importance of what he calls the “metaphysics of etymologizing” in the *Phaedrus* when he writes of the etymologies that “they are pointers toward regions of reality rather than referential exhibitors.” See White, *Rhetoric and Reality in Plato’s Phaedrus*, 69. The etymologies traced here open the reader to the meaning of ἐρως as a desire for the best. The etymological path we have charted is reinforced by White’s own position that a “pattern of etymologizing emerges in the *Phaedrus*, beginning at 238c, when love takes its name from the words for the force of desire, and reaching a concerted peak in the discussion of the first type of madness (244bff)” (*ibid.*, 66).

⁵² Yunis insists that “καλῶν” is “evidently masculine given the context.” Yunis, *Plato: Phaedrus*, 148. But de Vries has it right when he insists that it is probably both masculine and neuter, referring to 248d3–4, where philosophy is associated with “φιλοκάλου” – the love of beauty, and 249a1–2, where Socrates speaks of philosophy as combining a love of young boys with a love of wisdom. See Vries, *A Commentary on the Phaedrus of Plato*, 148. If we take “καλῶν” in the morphologically ambiguous way suggested above such that it points at once to an individual beloved and to the love of beauty itself, then it expresses well what McCoy says about the *Phaedrus* as a whole: “... Socrates’ philosophical rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* is characterized by his love of the forms and of Phaedrus.” See McCoy, *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists*, 193.

relief when the text *is read*. Although it is perhaps heard in the spoken word, it is seen more clearly in the morphology of the written word by a reader willing to tarry with the text, to slow down with it so as to bring it to life. The ambiguity draws the reader's attention to the manner in which our erotic relationships with one another must always also involve an erotic relation to the ideals of the beautiful and the best. The erotic relation with beauty is best, Plato has Socrates emphasize, both for the one who has it and for the one who shares in it. This, indeed, might be read as the core teaching of Platonic and Socratic politics both, for human living with one another can only become healthy and enriched if all of our relationships are animated by an erotic desire for the beautiful and the best, ideals that are discernible even if they remain ultimately elusive.

What is accessible to the reader, however, is not always accessible to the interlocutor. It is no surprise that Phaedrus does not explicitly remark on the connection among these three moments of etymological insight, for he would have been too caught up in the living flow of the dialogue to be able to discern the manner in which they gather together a constellation of concerns at the very center of the dialogue itself. He does, however, show signs of having understood the direction toward which they point, namely to an endeavor that would attempt to put words in the service of the beautiful and the best. Thus, at the topological level, Socrates says and does things that call Phaedrus to consider the nature of their relationship and the quality of the words they speak to one another. At the topographical level, however, Plato introduces Socrates' first speech and breaks it up in ways that call us to consider the way words do things not only to the characters about whom we read but also to all who attend carefully to the things being said and written between people. If this is the case, the topography of the text anticipates something that Socrates will increasingly emphasize topologically with Phaedrus: what makes a *logos* well or badly said or written is the manner of its erotic orientation and the depth of its concern at once for the best and for the character of the one to whom it is addressed.

Thus, it is no surprise to find that Socrates is prevented by his own daimonion from crossing the stream after articulating this speech. The things he has just said and the things Lysias wrote were, as

Socrates himself insists, “neither healthy nor true (*mēden hugies . . . mēde alēthes*).”⁵³ The speeches to this point have cultivated in those to whom they were addressed a perverse understanding of *erōs* and thus a lack of concern for the best. Socrates thus offers a recantation to Eros himself, and he does so now with his “head exposed (*gumnēi*) and not covered on account of shame.”⁵⁴ This gesture of exposure carries with it a sense of vulnerability that opens the possibility of a new, more healthy relationship between Socrates and Phaedrus on the one hand and between their relationship and the best on the other. If, as was suggested, by covering his head Socrates performed an action with a twofold pedagogical design – calling Phaedrus’ attention to the relational dynamic between them and orienting their shared concern to the question of qualitative propriety – this moment of uncovering deepens the relational connection between Phaedrus and Socrates, holding their relationship accountable both to the gaze of the individual to whom the recantation is spoken and also to the ideal of love itself.

Whatever else the palinode is about – and it is surely rich in philosophical significance – it is also an attempt to articulate the nature of a healthy and true erotic relationship to ideal forms that is itself informed by and capable of transforming our relationships with one another. Thus, unlike the first speech from which he explicitly distances himself, saying that he has forgotten precisely where and from whom he heard it,⁵⁵ Socrates takes ownership of the palinode, insisting: “I want to wash away the briny things heard with a potable speech.”⁵⁶ This fresh speech is a kind of restorative, a *pharmakon* designed to bring those who heard the first two speeches back to health.⁵⁷ But if the doctor must not only understand the nature of health itself, but also the manner in which, as Phaedrus had already recognized, medicine must be given in a specific context, the potable speech Socrates is about to offer must be given in a specific way to a specific individual. To reinforce this, Socrates seeks “that boy of mine” from the first speech who “must hear this also, lest,

⁵³ *Phaedrus*, 243a1.

⁵⁴ *Phaedrus*, 243b5–6. The word “γυμνῆ” carries with it the connotation of defenselessness or being unarmed.

⁵⁵ *Phaedrus*, 235c–d.

⁵⁶ *Phaedrus*, 243d3–4.

⁵⁷ Griswold says: “The palinode is both a remedy and an inoculation – the perfect *pharmakon*.” See Griswold, *Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus*, 73.

not hearing it, he might go and gratify the non-lover.” Phaedrus replies, erotically: “He is always right here beside you whenever you want him.”⁵⁸ The exchange reinforces the erotic nature of the relationship between Socrates and Phaedrus even as it amplifies the fact that the speech is not administered in the abstract but to a living individual palpably affected by two acerbic speeches. Phaedrus playfully takes on the role of *erōmenos* to Socrates’ *erastēs*, and in so doing, as Yunis writes, Phaedrus “starts to move away from being a disinterested spectator of an epideictic competition and towards becoming an interested party in a rhetorical situation that puts a critical choice before him.”⁵⁹

If, at the topological level, the shift from disinterest to engagement is enacted by Phaedrus’ willingness to become the one to whom the palinode is addressed, at the topographical level, an invitation to become a more actively engaged reader is announced by a playful string of proper names. Plato has Socrates identify “Phaedrus, son of Pythocles, and man of Myrrinous” as the one responsible for his first speech, and he identifies “Stesichorus, the son of Euphemus, of Himera” as responsible for the palinode.⁶⁰ Victorino Tejera has followed a long tradition of scholarly interpretation that ascribes philosophical significance to these proper names.⁶¹ He suggests that with these names:

⁵⁸ *Phaedrus*, 243e4–6.

⁵⁹ Yunis, *Plato*: *Phaedrus*, 126. While Yunis and De Vries may be right to insist that the relationship between Phaedrus and Socrates does not map adequately onto the traditional *erōmenos/erastēs* relationship because Phaedrus is not characterized as a young man in the dialogue, still, de Vries overstates things when he claims: “there is no erotic link between Socrates and Phaedrus” and that “[i]n the present dialogue nothing points to it.” See Vries, *A Commentary on the Phaedrus of Plato*, 113 and 6, respectively. In the passage here under consideration, the erotic play anticipates on an interhuman level the deeper understanding of erotic madness articulated in the palinode itself, that madness by which the one who loves the beautiful is called a lover (*Phaedrus*, 249e1–4). The erotic link that connects Phaedrus and Socrates is, first of all, the love of speeches, and then increasingly, the love of words written and spoken toward the beautiful and the best.

⁶⁰ These identifications do not undermine the claim that Socrates takes ownership of the palinode. Rather, just as the author of the first speech is “forgotten” by Socrates even if it is Phaedrus who is responsible for it – for he “forced” Socrates to speak it (*Phaedrus*, 235c–d, 238d4) – the palinode is willingly spoken by Socrates even if it is the experience of Stesichorus, who was struck blind for speaking ill of Helen, that is responsible for the palinode.

⁶¹ De Vries rehearses this tradition, tracing it back to Hermias. See Vries, *A Commentary on the Phaedrus of Plato*, 113–4.

the reader becomes conscious of the connotations of the name Stesichorus, or “choral leader,” and of the beautiful meaning of the beautiful youngster [Phaedrus], the “shining one.” He is the son of the “fame seeker” (Pythocles) from “Wreathville” (Myrrhinous), while the repentant poet is the son of “Mr. Finespeak” (Euphemos) from “Longington” (Himera).⁶²

Although De Vries doubts that this way of designating Phaedrus is anything more than an attempt at mock solemnity by Socrates – that is, he reads the epithet from an exclusively topological perspective – De Vries does recognize that with the designation of Stesichorus, “it is inconceivable that Plato was not conscious of the associations with *euphēmein* and *himeros*.”⁶³ The peculiarity of these epithets forces De Vries from the topological to the topographical perspective. But not only is it inconceivable that Plato was not conscious of the associations, the terms themselves announce the shift in orientation the palinode is designed to enact. The speech is spoken to a Phaedrus obsessed with fame and the trappings of notoriety by a Socrates concerned to use fine words to cultivate in Phaedrus a longing for beauty and truth. By introducing this speech with these epithets, Plato invites the reader to hear the speech in the context of the broader trajectory of the dialogue. The poetic dimension of the speech, which is emphasized when Socrates calls the “choral leader” its author, is designed to cultivate in Phaedrus a healthy erotic relation to the beautiful and the true. This is the dramatic reality in which the palinode as written is rooted, and it is the wider context in which it must be read.⁶⁴

Thus, although the speech itself is rich in philosophical significance, it will be most helpful here to focus on the manner in which it seeks to lead the soul of the one to whom it is addressed away from a concern for

⁶² Tejera, *Plato's Dialogues One by One*, 49. The passage is cited to emphasize the manner in which the names invite the reader to become conscious of some main themes in the dialogue, but not to endorse the notion that Phaedrus was a “youngster.”

⁶³ Vries, *A Commentary on the Phaedrus of Plato*, 114.

⁶⁴ Wallace Stevens takes issue with Plato's writing in the palinode for failing to adhere to what is real: “The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real . . . In Plato's figure [of the charioteer and horses], his imagination does not adhere to what is real.” Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 645. However, what is real in this context is not so much the poetic image Socrates articulates but the context in which it is said and the manner in which it puts a healthy erotic relationship to beauty and the truth into words.

fame and glory toward a longing for the truth. The playful series of etymologies we traced earlier concerning love (*erōs*), madness (*manikēs*), and the best (*aristē*) anticipates the direction in which Socrates seeks to lead Phaedrus. The palinode itself explicitly seeks to show that *erōs* is sent by the gods to benefit the lover and the beloved and that the erotic relation between them is not the perverse, impoverishing, and dangerous association the two previous speeches had presumed. Socrates attempts to rehabilitate the meaning of *erōs* by establishing its relationship with the best, the beautiful, and the true. The famous simile in which the mortal soul is said to be like a team of winged horses and their winged charioteer is designed to articulate the manner in which the soul is erotically connected with the “being that really is,” with “justice itself” and “judiciousness” and, indeed, with the truth.⁶⁵ Socrates thematizes the erotic nature of this connection in terms of a kind of eagerness for nourishment. He says:

The reason for the great eagerness (*hē pollē spoudē*) to see the plain of truth is that proper pasturage for the best part of the soul happens to be from the meadow there, and the nature of the wing that lifts the soul is nourished there.⁶⁶

The vocabulary resonates with other cosmological myths found in Plato, but what here should be emphasized is the degree to which the erotic desire for the ideas encountered on the plain of truth is rooted in yearning for nourishment.⁶⁷ The best part of the soul and the wings that lift it from its entanglement with those desires that impoverish it are nourished by the ideas of truth, justice, judiciousness, and, indeed, beauty. It is this later to which Socrates turns when he insists that “whenever someone sees beauty in this world he is reminded of true

⁶⁵ *Phaedrus*, 246a3–b5 and 247c4–e4. Socrates is careful here to remind Phaedrus that to say what the form of the soul is would be “a task for a god and a lengthy narrative, but to say what it is like would be briefer and something a human-being could do” (246a3–5). Again, when he speaks about that place beyond the heavens where truth, justice and being are seen by the gods, Socrates again reminds Phaedrus, and us, that “no poet has ever sung in a worthy way about it, nor shall any ever sing so” (247c4–5). He then goes on to say what is it like. The care with which Plato put these caveats into the mouth of Socrates should put Phaedrus, and us, on guard against the hubris that presumes humans to have unmediated access to truth, justice, and being.

⁶⁶ *Phaedrus*, 248b5–c2.

⁶⁷ See Yunis, *Plato*: *Phaedrus*, 143.

beauty and his wings begin to grow feathers.”⁶⁸ Beauty, it seems, is capable of connecting the mortal soul here to the meadow of truth there; and so it is that Socrates is able to establish a more enriching understanding of *erōs* first by rooting it in a desire for the ideals of beauty, justice, and truth, and then by insisting that erotic encounters with beautiful beings in the world are capable of calling humans to that ideal of beauty beyond the heavens.

Thus, it is not so much the desire to do what the gods do, namely, “study what lies beyond the heavens,” that Socrates stresses in the palinode, but rather he emphasizes the profound implications for *inter-human relationships* an awareness of the ideals of beauty, truth, and justice can have. This is why Socrates draws his speech to a close first by reminding Phaedrus that the speech is given to “you beautiful boy” and then by demonstrating that a more enriching sense of *erōs* can shift the course of life of those who love. Socrates shows how someone who truly loves and is not pretending comes to “have a love that is the reflection of love, but he calls it friendship for he supposes it is friendship rather than love.”⁶⁹ In fact, Socrates calls the sort of friendship that emerges between two people who have a healthy erotic attunement to the ideals of justice, beauty, and truth a “friendship with wisdom,” that is, philosophy. Thus, philosophical friendship is not simply a certain erotic relationship to these ideals, but it involves a way of living together in light of those ideals. Socrates puts it this way in the palinode as he speaks about the relationship that emerges between a true lover and beloved: “Now when the better aspects of thinking things through (*dianoias*) prevails in leading them to an orderly way of life (*diaitan*) and a friendship with wisdom, they will lead a blessed and harmonious life here.”⁷⁰ This way of life, which is juxtaposed with a “more vulgar way of life, befriending not wisdom by fame and honor,” is characterized as a kind of journey travelled together, a journey that must in this context be read as a gesture to the journey of Socrates and Phaedrus that the

⁶⁸ *Phaedrus*, 249d5.

⁶⁹ *Phaedrus*, 255d7–e1. The trajectory here resonates with that found in Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium*. Drew Hyland disentangles the meanings of ἔρως, ἐπιθυμία, and φιλία in Plato that should be held in mind in the present context. See Hyland, “Eros, Epithumia and Philia in Plato.” For a discussion of Hyland’s view and how it relates to Aristotle’s, see Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, 201–29.

⁷⁰ *Phaedrus*, 256a6–b2.

dialogue itself enacts. Thus, Socrates speaks to their immediate and very concrete erotic situation – on the bank of a cool stream in the middle of a hot summer day, alone and in close physical proximity – when he says: “The custom (*nomos*) is that those who have already begun the journey up toward the heavens shall not go down into the darkness of the journey under the earth, but rather they shall continue their illustrative life (*phanon bion*), travelling happily together with one another.”⁷¹ The end of the palinode thus marks a decisive turning point in the course of both the dialogue and the journey Socrates has undertaken together with Phaedrus. Socrates marks the turn with a prayer in which he asks Eros to forgive him and Phaedrus for their harsh treatment of him and requests assistance concerning Lysias and his lover, Phaedrus:

Blame Lysias, father of that [harsh] speech, and make him cease from such speeches and turn him toward friendship with wisdom, just as his brother, Polemarchus, has been turned, in order that his lover here will no longer be ambivalent, as he is now, but rather will create a life wholly dedicated toward love through speeches characterized by a friendship with wisdom.”⁷²

Phaedrus’ response is telling. It bespeaks a lingering ambivalence even as it affirms the things for which Socrates prays: “I join you in that prayer (*Suneuchomai*), Socrates, if indeed (*eiper*), we will be better off should those things happen.”⁷³ The emphasis on the conditional signals that Phaedrus remains ambivalent, and yet he emphatically joins Socrates in the prayer. Despite his lingering ambivalence, Phaedrus, it seems, is now prepared to turn his full attention to what it might mean to “create a life wholly dedicated toward love through speeches characterized by a friendship with wisdom.”

ENGAGED DISCERNMENT

The education of Phaedrus holds the dialogue together. The palinode has provoked a sense of wonder (*thaumasas*) in Phaedrus, causing him

⁷¹ *Phaedrus*, 256d5–e2.

⁷² *Phaedrus*, 257b2–6.

⁷³ *Phaedrus*, 257b7–c1.

to reintroduce the question of writing into the dialogue; for he has now discerned how much more beautiful the palinode is than both Socrates' first speech and the speech Lysias has written. Indeed, the beauty of Socrates' speech has now shed new light on the nature of Lysian writing for Phaedrus, who is now able to correctly identify a concern for "friendship with fame and honor" as the motivation behind it. Thus it is that the question of politics is explicitly introduced in the dialogue for the first time, for the writing of speeches is said to be bound up with the concerns of politicians to augment their fame and reinforce their honor.⁷⁴ But Socrates leads Phaedrus quickly to understand that "there is nothing shameful about writing speeches itself . . . But this, I think, is shameful indeed: to speak and to write, not beautifully, but shamefully and badly."⁷⁵

Phaedrus is eager to take up the question Socrates then introduces, namely, "how does one write well or badly?"⁷⁶ This question is important both topologically and topographically. On the topological level, it leads Socrates and Phaedrus directly to a collaborative and close reading of the beginning of Lysias' written text – a reading that illustrates just how far the education of Phaedrus has progressed since the beginning of the dialogue. On the topographical level, however, this question invites us to consider the text of the *Phaedrus* itself as an exemplar of writing well. Indeed, our awareness of the text *as written* is heightened by the intrusion of singing cicadas. Immediately after agreeing that it is necessary to pursue the question of how to write well or badly, Socrates calls attention to the cicadas singing above their heads, enjoining them to "spend their time in friendship with wisdom."⁷⁷ Ferrari has emphasized the topographical importance of this intrusion of the background into the foreground:

⁷⁴ As Nichols notes, the vocabulary of the πόλις is introduced here for the first time in the dialogue. At the beginning, Socrates spoke about Lysias being "in town," ἐν ἄστει, and did not use the word πόλις to highlight the city as a political unit. See Nichols, *Socrates on Friendship and Community*, 123. Even so, however, already at the beginning, Socrates does introduce the question of the impact of speeches on the wider political public when he playfully calls speeches written about gratifying those who are poor rather than rich or older rather than young as "urbane and beneficial to the people (ἄστεϊοι καὶ δημοφελεῖς)" (227d1–20).

⁷⁵ *Phaedrus*, 258d1–5.

⁷⁶ *Phaedrus*, 258d7.

⁷⁷ *Phaedrus*, 259d3.

Plato marks the transitional point between the two parts of the dialogue with renewed attention to its scene in order to orient our reading of its curious structure – brusque shift, that is, from celebration of love to cerebration over rhetoric.⁷⁸

Although the structure of the dialogue is rather curious, the shift is not all that brusque insofar as Socrates has been leading Phaedrus to consider precisely the connection between the love of words and the friendship with wisdom the second part of the dialogue will emphasize. Nevertheless, Ferrari is right to insist that the appearance of the cicadas is designed to orient our reading to the important turn in the educational journey Socrates and Phaedrus are taking. He further does very well to call our attention to the manner in which the cicadas' singing "alerts the reader . . . to what the dialectic in that second part is showing rather than to what it is saying."⁷⁹ We might refine this point by suggesting that what Socrates says in the second part of the dialogue is designed to continue to lead Phaedrus to a healthy love of speeches in the service of an ever-deepening friendship with wisdom, while what Plato shows in the second part of the dialogue is the profound political power of collaborative reading. Thus, in turning our attention to this last part of the dialogue, it will be necessary to discern how the manner Socrates cultivates the habits of engaged critical discernment in Phaedrus cultivates also in us readers those same habits that enable us to practice politics as a life wholly dedicated to the love of speeches rooted in a friendship with wisdom.

Socrates begins by calling Phaedrus' attention to the main pedagogical objective of their conversation. Raising again the question of whether the ability to make speeches is an art or an artless routine (*atechnas tribē*) – a distinction that draws this text into close connection with the *Gorgias* in which the distinction between art and experience had been drawn so powerfully in dialogue with Polus – Socrates insists that "unless he develops an adequate friendship with wisdom, [Phaedrus] will never speak adequately about anything."⁸⁰ In order to lend concrete determination to the discussion of artful and artless

⁷⁸ Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas*, 25–6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸⁰ *Phaedrus*, 261a4–5. The connection between the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* is emphasized in Yunis, "Dialectic and the Purpose of Rhetoric in Plato's *Phaedrus*," 233. There Yunis is

speeches, Socrates suggests that they look closely at the examples they have before them. Phaedrus himself understands the value of this approach when he eagerly agrees, saying: “At the moment we are speaking rather abstractly, for we do not have adequate examples (*paradeigmata*).”⁸¹ This remark clarifies the extent to which Phaedrus himself is now attuned to the pedagogical importance of critically engaging a concrete example at a detailed level and with an erotic concern to delineate the truth articulated there. This is the context in which they turn together to the things Lysias wrote.

Socrates asks Phaedrus to read the beginning of the text, but before Phaedrus can complete the third sentence, Socrates interrupts. It happens the moment Lysias has the nonlover speak to the youth of lovers’ regret, “*metamelei*.” Specifically, Socrates interrupts the sentence mid-way through its apodosis – “those [lovers] then regret . . .” – but before the protasis – “. . . whenever lovers stop desiring” – can be articulated. On the topological level, by interrupting the sentence, Socrates invites Phaedrus to take a up a critical position concerning the speech by insisting that they “must say how Lysias misses the mark and makes something artless.”⁸² But on the topographical level, by fragmenting the sentence at the moment of regret and before the idea can be articulated that a lover might stop desiring, Plato invites us to consider the deeper philosophical significance of breaking the sentence apart in this particular way. Taking up this invitation requires us to consider the question of regret itself, particularly as it relates to Phaedrus and his earlier enthusiasm for the speech. But it also requires us to consider the significance behind Socrates’ refusal here to allow it to be said that a lover ceases desiring.⁸³ The key to that question, it seems, can be heard

interested in articulating the difference between Socrates’ account of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* as opposed to the *Phaedrus*. In what follows, however, emphasis will be placed on the continuity between the two texts specifically with regard to the beautiful rhetoric Socrates points to in the *Gorgias*. See *Gorgias*, 503a7–9 and [Chapter 3](#).

⁸¹ *Phaedrus*, 262c6–7.

⁸² *Phaedrus*, 262e5.

⁸³ This return to the beginning in the *Phaedrus* is designed to call the reader’s attention to the erotic dimension of λόγος. Anne Carson emphasizes a different but equally important dimension of this return to the beginning. She rightly insists that Socrates returns repeatedly to the beginning of Lysias’ λόγος because he wants to amplify the manner in which the moment of beginning, and thus the point in time when Eros enters the lover, is deleted by Lysias. As Carson notes, this moment “is for Socrates the single most important moment to confront and grasp.” See Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 153.

on the topological level as Socrates requires Phaedrus to consider the degree to which love is something about which people disagree.

The response Phaedrus offers to this question illustrates the educational distance he has travelled, for he affirms that love is something about which people disagree and appeals for proof to the contradictory things Socrates himself said about love in his two speeches. Phaedrus here demonstrates the ability to answer a question succinctly and with reference to specific examples from the things having been said. Hearing this response, Socrates celebrates his excellent point, reinforcing the progress he seems to have made: “*Arista legeis*,” “you say the best things.”⁸⁴ In so affirming him, Socrates implicitly suggests that Phaedrus is indeed learning to speak words characterized by friendship with wisdom. Phaedrus recalls for Socrates – who claims to have forgotten, having been possessed by the Nymphs and Pan himself – that his first speech does in fact define love at the beginning, and in so doing, that speech at least more artfully orients the listener to the specific sense of love at work. Yet, in affirming that the speech of Pan and the Nymphs – Socrates’ first speech – is more artful, Socrates implicitly draws attention to the possibility that a speech might be artful but fail to be true; that is, it might be formally well crafted, even if it has ultimately a perverse understanding of love as unconcerned with the ideals of truth and beauty.

However, to discern whether Lysias himself does in fact begin with a definition of the meaning of the love about which he writes, Socrates asks Phaedrus to take up the speech again and read from the beginning. This time Socrates allows Phaedrus to read the entire sentence he had interrupted previously: “those [lovers] then regret the benefits they brought about whenever they stop desiring.”⁸⁵ The protasis now articulated reveals precisely the kind of madness the speech considers *erōs* to be, namely, the sort of madness that pulls one away from one’s ideals and subverts one’s better judgment. On the view assumed by Lysias’ speech, *erōs* is synonymous with *epithumia*. One problem with the identification of *erōs* and *epithumia* is that it presumes that the desiring associated with *erōs* is in fact something that temporarily possesses one

⁸⁴ *Phaedrus*, 263d2.

⁸⁵ *Phaedrus*, 263e6–d4.

in a way that perverts the healthy operation of *logos* and *dianoia*. This is precisely the understanding of *erōs* Socrates sought subtly to call into question already in his first speech when he implicitly argued not from the perspective of the nonlover but from the perspective of the lying lover.⁸⁶ To speak as a lying lover is to recognize the degree to which *erōs* is always operating in varying ways in all interpersonal encounters. Thus, even if the first speech continues to be harsh with Eros insofar as it refused to recognize the integral role *erōs* plays in drawing us toward the true, the beautiful, and the good, it at least begins to move us in the direction of such an understanding of *erōs*, the details of which will find articulation in the palinode.

Their close collaborative reading of Lysias breaks off once Socrates emphasizes to Phaedrus the importance of organization in writing. Lysias' speech is not well written because it lacks what Socrates calls "logographic necessity (*anangkēn logographikēn*);" it is not "organized like a living being with a body of its own, lacking neither head nor feet, but having both a middle and extremes, written in a way befitting both each other and the whole."⁸⁷ Here the topology of Socratic politics dovetails beautifully with the topography of Platonic politics insofar as what Socrates says to Phaedrus here is written by Plato also for us. What Socrates wants Phaedrus to understand about the failure of Lysias' writing, Plato asks us to understand concerning the possible success of *his* writing: if the symptom of writing well lies in how a text holds itself organically together, then it is necessary for the reader to consider carefully how the two parts of the *Phaedrus* were "written in a way befitting both each other and the whole."

Perhaps a clue to this may be heard in the manner in which Plato has Socrates interrupt Phaedrus' reading of Lysias. By breaking off the speech first in the middle of the sentence about regret and desire, but prior to the moment in which the perverse understanding of erotic desire is articulated, Plato signals the importance of regret and the need to carefully consider the nature of erotic desire itself. By allowing the entire sentence to be spoken in what really is the third reading of the

⁸⁶ Socrates insists at the beginning of his first speech that it is one of the boy's lovers that convinces him that he does not love him. *Phaedrus*, 237b2–4.

⁸⁷ *Phaedrus*, 264c3–6.

text in the dialogue, Plato implicitly raises and thus subtly amplifies the question as to how to understand the nature of erotic desire. The difference between the two rereadings of the texts would likely have been opaque to Phaedrus, and Socrates himself does not explicitly call attention to it. And yet, to the careful reader, it is rather striking that the two passages are not identical.⁸⁸ Indeed, only a *reading* of the text allows the precise manner in which Socrates interrupts Phaedrus to be thematized as *philosophically significant*; it would be strange indeed if Phaedrus explicitly called into question Socrates' decision not to allow him to complete the sentence the second time he read it or if he asked him why, on the third reading, he let him complete the entire sentence. The philosophical significance of the interruption shows itself on the topographical level, but it points to the thematic heart of the dialogue insofar as it calls our attention to the proper understanding of *erōs* as it relates to writing and speaking words well. The peculiar manner in which Socrates interrupts Phaedrus reading Lysias is by no means the only sign pointing to the heart of the dialogue, nor is it perhaps the most important sign, for a careful reading of the dialogue is able, as we have hopefully heard, to trace the contours of the organic whole in the psychagogic journey Socrates and Phaedrus have taken together. But the interruption, which becomes thematic in a caring reading of the *Phaedrus*, invites us to respond to the writing with an erotic desire to encounter the truth of what is written, a truth that is written in an attempt to cultivate in those who read an erotic relation to the truth itself. The habits Socrates seeks to cultivate in Phaedrus by engaging with him in a collaborative reading of the things Lysias wrote are precisely the habits Plato seeks to cultivate in us by having Socrates perform a collaborative reading with Phaedrus for us. In this way, the final part of the dialogue, the articulation of the true art of rhetoric, the myth of Theuth and Thamus and, ultimately, the agreement between Socrates and Phaedrus to put words, written and spoken, in the service of a friendship with wisdom is a protreptic spoken to move Phaedrus and written to move each of us.

⁸⁸ The original passage is: *Phaedrus* 230e6–231a3, the first reiteration is at 262e1–4 ending with “μεταμέλει”; the second reiteration is at 263e6–4a4 in which the first passage is rearticulated fully.

To see, finally, the extent of Phaedrus' learning in the dialogue is also to allow ourselves to join the journey he and Socrates have undertaken together; in tracing the manner in which Socrates leads Phaedrus by speeches to put words in the service of truth, we readers too must allow ourselves to be transformed. Socrates himself introduces the question of rhetoric as "a sort of art of leading souls by means of speeches (*technē psychagōgia tis dia logōn*)" not simply in the law courts and other public places, but also in "private situations (*en idiois*)."⁸⁹ In so doing, he emphasizes the manner in which the conversation between them is deeply rhetorical, concerned to lead the soul of Phaedrus by means of words. The entire discussion of rhetoric in the second part of the *Phaedrus*, however, is concerned with delineating precisely what sort of art this sort of rhetoric is. The discussion here may be heard to resonate deeply with that of the *Gorgias*. Plato in fact offers signals to encourage this, for not only does he have Socrates frame the problem here with Phaedrus as he did there with Polus in terms of the difference between a "*technē*" and an "*empeiria*" or a "*tribē*," but he also has Socrates situate the discussion into a context heavily saturated by references to famous sophists, including both Gorgias himself and Polus.⁹⁰ If these signals operate on the topographical level to call our attention to the arguments about rhetoric in the *Gorgias*, and specifically to the beautiful art of rhetoric to which Socrates gestures but does not fully develop, on the topological level, these signals gesture to the subtlety of Socrates' own rhetorical strategy with Phaedrus. For Socrates is able to lead the soul of Phaedrus by appealing to the words of the sophists he knows and respects. Indeed, the manner in which Socrates appeals not only to the sophists but also to doctors (268a7–8) and tragic poets (268c5) and even influential politicians (269a5) in order to move Phaedrus by words toward the practice of philosophy demonstrates the extent to which Socrates is in fact putting the beautiful art of rhetoric into practice with Phaedrus in the *Phaedrus*, just as he had with Gorgias in the *Gorgias*.

⁸⁹ *Phaedrus*, 261a7–b1.

⁹⁰ Yunis has remarked on how *Phaedrus* 260e4 is a "striking reminiscence of *Gorgias* 463b" where the terms mentioned are used. See Yunis, *Plato: Phaedrus*, 181. Gorgias is mentioned in this context at *Phaedrus* 261c2 and 267a6 and Polus at 267b10.

To better discern this, let us recall the three characteristics Socrates associated with the beautiful *technē* of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*. There Socrates had established a certain rhetoric – decidedly not the rhetoric of flattery and influence – as a “beautiful thing” precisely because it was capable of speaking toward the best.⁹¹ This capacity was shown to be rooted in three abilities, each of which might ultimately be mapped onto the relationship between Socrates and Phaedrus. The beautiful *technē* of rhetoric involved, first, the ability to look into the nature of the one with whom one is engaged; second, the ability to act rooted in an understanding of what is responsible for the present condition of the one for whom one cares; and third, the ability to thoughtfully anticipate what is best for the soul of the one for whom one is concerned. It is clear from the beginning of the *Phaedrus* that Socrates has a deep understanding of what animates Phaedrus’ life; indeed, already at the beginning, Socrates knows how obsessive Phaedrus is about speeches, and he leverages this love of speeches (*philologia*), which Socrates himself shares, to draw them together and move their discussion forward.⁹² Socrates knows too, however, that Phaedrus has demonstrated an unwillingness to simply passively receive the speeches of others, a point he emphasizes by praising him for producing more speeches than anyone with the possible exception of Simmias the Theban.⁹³ Understanding these things about Phaedrus, Socrates is also able to correctly diagnose the sickness with which Phaedrus is afflicted as he ventures on his walk outside the walls of the city. In fact, Socrates leads Phaedrus himself to recognize this condition when he identifies friendship with fame and honor rather than with wisdom as what animates the very speech with which he was so enthralled at the beginning.⁹⁴ The perverse sort of *erōs*

⁹¹ Socrates suggests that rhetoric might be a “beautiful thing” at *Gorgias*, 503a7–9. See [Chapter 3](#).

⁹² *Phaedrus*, 236e4.

⁹³ *Phaedrus*, 242a–b. The obvious example of Phaedrus’ capacity to generate speeches is, of course, the entire *Symposium*. The reference to Simmias, on the other hand, invites us to connect the *Phaedrus* to the *Phaedo*, where Simmias, as has been seen in [Chapter 4](#), was the one best able to identify and respond to the experience of misology. Whatever success Socrates has in moving Simmias and Phaedrus toward the practice of philosophy is rooted in their shared love of speeches. But ultimately, their conversion to philosophy depends on Socrates’ ability to leverage their love of speeches in his attempt to turn their attention toward the true, the beautiful, and the good.

⁹⁴ *Phaedrus*, 257c5–6.

in which this love of honor is rooted, Socrates calls a madness “caused by human sickness.” To this he juxtaposes true erotic madness “that comes into being through a divine disruption of habitual customs (*tōn eiōthotōn nomimōn*).”⁹⁵ Socrates has, it seems, been putting this divine disruption of habitual customs into practice with Phaedrus by using words to wean him from his obsessive love of the things Lysias wrote. This, indeed, has been shown to require that third ability associated with the art of beautiful rhetoric, namely, the ability to thoughtfully anticipate what is best for Phaedrus himself. If the palinode illustrates in mythical language the formal structure of a healthy erotic connection between the soul and the ideals of truth, beauty, and the good, then the discussion Socrates has with Phaedrus about the leading of souls at the end of the dialogue adds concrete content to that formal relation by illustrating how a particular soul can be healed and turned to a life animated not by an abstract love of wisdom but by the concrete attempt to weave an erotic love of the beautiful, the good, and the true into community with others.

If in the *Gorgias*, the three abilities associated with the art of beautiful rhetoric were modeled on the art of doctoring, it is no surprise here in the *Phaedrus* to find Socrates turning in the end to Hippocrates for insight into how best to think and speak about the nature of the soul.⁹⁶ The appeal to Hippocrates is designed to move Phaedrus – who had already at the beginning of the dialogue proven a willingness to listen to doctors – to appreciate the importance and difficulty of that first ability associated with the art of beautiful rhetoric: the need to identify the proper speech for the proper kind of soul.⁹⁷ This, indeed, has been shown to be the key to the practice of Socratic political philosophy; for Socrates is able to lead those he encounters toward the question of justice, truth, and beauty precisely because he “keenly perceives” the

⁹⁵ *Phaedrus*, 265a10–1. The reference here to habitual customs recalls us to the discussion of that law Socrates mentions in the *Gorgias* by which the soul becomes healthy. Two such laws mentioned there were justice and temperance. We might understand the divine disruption of habitual customs, then, as rooted in our erotic relationship to the ideals of which Socrates has spoken throughout – those erotic principles of justice, beauty, and truth that remain always capable of disrupting our habits and customs, thereby opening us to new possibilities of relation.

⁹⁶ *Phaedrus*, 270c8.

⁹⁷ *Phaedrus*, 271b1–4.

sort of person each person is, he is able to identify the sorts of words that will move each, and he knows “when one should speak and when one should remain silent.”⁹⁸ These are the very things Socrates himself tells Phaedrus are proper to the true art of speaking, teaching, and writing – they are, we might add, proper also to the attempt to practice the political art truly.⁹⁹ And yet this is precisely what, it seems, separates the Socratic from the Platonic practice of politics; for it is impossible in and through writing to keenly perceive the sort of person who might be addressed by the things written.

Thus, as soon as Socrates establishes the roots of the art of true rhetoric in this ability to be attuned to the nature of the soul of the one with whom one is engaged, Plato has him tell the story of Thamus and Theuth. On the topological level, the story reinforces for Phaedrus the dangers endemic to written words. Socrates puts it this way:

In a way, Phaedrus, writing has a strange character, which is similar to that of painting, actually. Painting’s creations stand there as though they were alive, but if you ask them anything, they maintain a quite solemn silence (*semōs panu sigai*). Speeches are the same way. You might expect them to speak like intelligent beings, but if you question them wanting to learn (*boulomenos mathein*) something about what they’re saying, they always just continue saying the same thing. Every speech, once it’s in writing, is bandied about everywhere equally among those who understand and those who’ve no business having it. It doesn’t know to whom it ought to speak and to whom not.¹⁰⁰

If, in delineating the meaning of dialogical hermeneutics in the Overture, we cited this passage to emphasize the manner in which the solemn silence of written texts invests them with an authority that enjoins an imaginative hermeneutic response, here in the context of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates may be heard to chastise Phaedrus for having no business bandying the text of Lysias about without the capacity to discern what is and is not well written. Indeed, the collaborative reading

⁹⁸ *Phaedrus*, 271c6–272a.

⁹⁹ Socrates identifies the ability to distinguish the nature of each soul and the ability to divide things in accordance with their forms and to comprehend each thing in accordance with a single form as part of what it means to be artful. See *Phaedrus*, 273d7–e2.

¹⁰⁰ *Phaedrus*, 275d3–e3.

in which they had engaged earlier amplified the extent to which the written text, when questioned, continued saying the same thing. And yet, in the reading and rereading of it as part of a living dialogue, the solemn silence of the text was permitted to speak between those engaged with it.

From the topographical perspective, then, Platonic politics may now be understood to be rooted in the capacity for a written text to be brought to life by collaborative readings and rereadings in which the things said in the text are permitted to speak directly to and perhaps even transform the lives of those engaged with it. Platonic writing, however, unlike Socratic saying, does not have direct experience with the souls of those with whom it is engaged. It must do with the abstract reader over generations what Socrates did only with great difficulty over a lifetime with those individuals he knew quite well. And yet, the reader engaged with the Platonic texts is never abstract, but brings always the contexts of history, time, culture, and concern. If what brings us to these texts is multifarious, if our souls are variegated, then the texts too must be variegated and polysemic if they are to be capable of moving us toward the ideals capable of transforming our lives with one another.¹⁰¹

The dialogues, of course, are just such variegated writings that say always the same thing but differently to different readers at different times. This is not, of course, to suggest that just anything can be read into the writings, for the great advantage Platonic writing has over Socratic saying is precisely that it has been written and so is preserved in ways that invite each new generation to confront what is written in the attempt to come to meaningful terms with it in our human lives together. These texts hold us accountable to them and, through them, we are held accountable to one another if we are willing to engage in collaborative, imaginative readings and rereadings of the texts and if we allow what is encountered in such readings and rereadings to alter the course of our lives together.

Ultimately, this is the power of what the *Phaedrus* demonstrates as a dialogue, for Phaedrus and Socrates allow their lives to be transformed

¹⁰¹ This recognition goes some distance in responding to the puzzle with which Christopher Rowe's book on Platonic writing begins: "One of the chief puzzles about Plato's writing, and the one from which I shall begin, is its enormous variety. Why should he write in so many different ways?" See Rowe, *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing*, 1.

by the discussion they've had. Socrates has managed to teach Phaedrus enough to provoke him to take a more active, conscientious role in generating speeches animated by a love of wisdom rather than a love of honor. In the end, Phaedrus himself says things that indicate the extent to which he has learned. When Socrates asks Phaedrus to see a kind of speech other than writing that is better and more powerful, Phaedrus responds: "You mean the living and animated (*zōnta kai empsuchon*) speech of the one who knows (*eidotos*), of which the written speech might justly be called an image."¹⁰² Platonic irony is at work here, for not only does the statement indicate that Phaedrus himself is becoming one who knows or sees, but as written, the sentence requires us readers to ask if we too have seen some truth in this written image of a living, animated speech. Here Phaedrus recognizes that not any speech is better and more powerful, but only those living speeches animated by the one who knows. The reduplication of terms for life – *zōnta*, *empsuchon* – suggests that the words must be attuned to life and capable of animating others; the sentence suggests that the one who knows is the one who "has seen" (*eidotos*) the ideals of truth, beauty, and justice, and thus is one who is animated by an erotic desire to communicate those ideals with others. This is, indeed, fleshed out, so to speak . . . or write, at the end of the dialogue as Socrates insists that the best writing is a kind of playing designed to "sow gardens of letters" and to cultivate the growth of "tender shoots."¹⁰³ Here again, Phaedrus follows along, insisting that this would be a noble kind of play indeed, "that of the one who is able to play with words, telling stories (*muthologounta*) about justice and the other things you said."¹⁰⁴ Phaedrus now emphasizes the degree to which words must be oriented toward the question of justice to be worthy of articulation. Socrates, affirming this, gives voice to precisely what animates his own life. In it, we hear, perhaps, something of what must have animated Plato's:

Thus it is, Phaedrus my friend, but far more beautiful, I think, is becoming serious concerning these things, when someone uses the dialectical art and, taking a proper soul, plants and sows in it words

¹⁰² *Phaedrus*, 276a7–8.

¹⁰³ *Phaedrus*, 276d1–7.

¹⁰⁴ *Phaedrus*, 276e1–3.

accompanied by knowledge, words that can defend both themselves and the one who planted them and that are not infertile but have seeds from which others grow in other places (*hothen alloi en allois ēthesi*), so they come to be eternal and immortal; having them makes a human being as happy as a human can be.¹⁰⁵

This happy life is dedicated to sowing seeds of speech in each new generation and in every proper location in ways that enrich the lives of those in whom they grow. Becoming more serious concerning these things is to endeavor to put such nourishing words to things, animated by a concern for the beautiful, the just, and the good as much for what is proper to the individuals with whom one is engaged.

And so, the *Phaedrus* ends just like the *Protagoras*, with Socrates leaving together with the one with whom he came. But if the *Protagoras* left undetermined the further education of Hippocrates, the *Phaedrus* illustrates the transformative power of Socratic teaching; for Phaedrus re-enters the city intent on putting his words in the service of the ideals of justice and truth. He intends, in short, to practice Socratic politics, which means nothing more or less than doing things with words animated by a love of wisdom. That Phaedrus seems to have failed in this attempt, having fled into exile in the wake of accusations associated with his profaning of the Eleusinian mysteries in 415 BCE, suggests that, however convincing his collaborative reading of Lysias with Socrates was, a commitment to philosophical politics never took root and grew.¹⁰⁶ Yet the dialogue itself demonstrates the power of collaborative reading in ways that require us to consider the extent to which Plato's activity of writing itself has turned our attention to the possibilities that emerge between people when our lives and the words we use to make them possible are animated by a concern to articulate the truth in living dialogue with one another.

¹⁰⁵ *Phaedrus*, 276e4–7a4. Yunis emphasizes that the formulation “ὅθεν ἄλλοι ἐν ἄλλοις ἤθουσι suggests a dynamic quality to this dialectical discourse-production: as discourse is sown in souls of different types the discourse changes while the overall process endures.” See Yunis, *Plato: Phaedrus*, 235. Plato here seems to be enjoining us to participate in precisely this enduring process.

¹⁰⁶ See Nails, *The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics*, 232–3.

7 PHILOSOPHY AS POLITICS

If over the course of the preceding pages we have heard something of how Socrates puts his political art into practice, we have also encountered the concrete practice of Platonic political writing that seeks to do with readers what Socrates sought to do with each individual he encountered. By attending closely not only to the things Socrates says to those he encounters in the dialogues but also to the ways Plato has him say specific things in specific ways to specific people in specific contexts, we have, as readers, been drawn into a relation with the text that cannot remain abstract. Platonic writing calls each reader's life into question, enjoining us to speak truth to and with one another in order that we might live the questions of justice, beauty, and the good, and in so living, weave these erotic ideals into the reality of our lives together.¹

Of course, what Plato wrote was, at its heart, the arc of Socrates' life.² To recall the words of the *Second Epistle*, "... there is no writing (*suggramma*) of Plato, nor will there be; the present [writings] are the sayings (*ta de nun legomena*) of a Socrates become beautiful and new."³ In the *Protagoras* the arc of the life of Socrates was marked at its midpoint by an encounter with Hippocrates that enjoins us to consider the way Socrates allowed his own life to be determined by a concern for the course of the life of another. The picture we encountered there of a new and beautiful Socrates invites us to imagine what animates the

¹ The injunction to "live the questions" is, of course, borrowed from the fourth of Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. See Rilke et al., *Letters to a Young Poet*, 35.

² For a compelling and comprehensive reading of the dialogues that takes this seriously, see Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*.

³ *Second Letter*, 314c1–4; see [Chapter 1](#).

course of our own lives and to ask how committed we are to the lives and well-being of those we encounter. The *Protagoras* too, in depicting Protagoras as unable to cultivate a genuine community of dialogue with Socrates, suggests the degree to which the well-being of others depends on our abilities to speak in our own voices and to listen attentively in turn. The arc of Socrates' life was then traced in the chapter that followed through his engagement with Gorgias, Polus, and Calicles in which a decidedly political picture of his philosophical life was drawn and politics came to be experienced as an attuned way of speaking toward the best in relation to each individual encountered. Readers of the *Gorgias* are made to feel the limits the power of words have to change the course of the lives of those committed more to fame and influence than to justice and truth. Calicles remains unmoved by his conversation with Socrates. Even so, however, that text also requires us to consider how a rhetoric made beautiful by an intimate connection to the philosophical endeavor can have potentially transformative effects.

Then, at the midpoint of the arc that is this book, we read the death of Socrates. There, however, we encountered also the ongoing life of the community of those who knew him. For the *Phaedo* illustrates more powerfully than any dialogue Socrates' abiding commitment to the power of words oriented toward truth and their ability to create and preserve a community committed to justice and what is good. That text, as written, has perhaps done more than any other to preserve for the generations that followed the spirit of Socrates. The *Phaedo* is not simply the story of the death of Socrates; its elegant textual eloquence ensures the continuing efficacy of the political practices that animated his life. As a written document, the *Phaedo* is thus rendered political, for it carries the Socratic political project into posterity by enjoining each generation of readers to consider the limits of life and the things that become possible when we commit ourselves to speaking truth to and with one another.

Our reading of the *Phaedo* thus marked the transition from the topology of Socratic politics to the topography of Platonic politics. The *Apology* then was read as a written defense of the life of Socrates in which a dialogue is staged between Socrates and the "men of Athens." The defense, as mentioned, is "of Socrates" in a twofold sense: it is both Socrates' own defense and a defense of the political practices of his

philosophical life.⁴ Plato puts this twofold defense into the mouth of Socrates, staging a dialogue with the “men of Athens” that presents a picture of the idiosyncratic, subversive, and provocative practices of Socratic politics. But the dialogue is written to be read, for it is designed to awaken readers to the question of justice and the need to situate this question itself at the center of the life we live together in community. To read the *Apology* in this way is to recognize that Platonic writing is deeply attuned to the political nature of reading. Such a recognition connects the *Apology* and the *Phaedrus*, a dialogue that was shown to perform the politics of collaborative reading. The political effect of the *Phaedrus* is felt in the experience it enacts in those who read it. Anne Carson puts it this way:

As Phaedrus reads what Lysias wrote, as Phaedrus listens to what Sokrates says, something begins to come into focus. You begin to understand what a *logos* is and what it is not and the difference between them. Eros is the difference. Like a face crossing a mirror at the back of the room, Eros moves. You reach. Eros is gone.⁵

The Socratic political *logos* inhabits the erotic space between interlocutors as they seek together to speak truth toward justice. To speak truth toward justice, however, is to encounter the limits of *logos* itself; for justice, as we have heard, is an erotic ideal, elusive to all who reach for it even if, in the very reaching, we bring something of the ideal into reality. If the lesson Socrates brought to those gathered in his cell on his final day was not to relinquish the attempt to speak truth toward justice, because even in its repeated and necessary failure, the world is made more just by the attempt, the lesson Platonic writing delivers to us is the same. The Platonic texts cultivate in us erotic habits of thinking and speaking attuned at once to the limits of *logos* and to its power to transform our relationships to and with one another. Just as Socrates sought to open those he encountered to the erotic dimensions of the attempt to speak truth toward justice by curing them of their delusions of knowing and cultivating in them a concern for what is best, so too Platonic writing opens an erotic space between the text and the reader in which our delusions of certainty give way to a concern for questions

⁴ See [Chapter 5](#).

⁵ Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 166.

capable of transforming the course of our lives and our relationships with others. Carson emphasizes how this erotic space is opened in the *Phaedrus*:

Each time you read it, you are conducted to a place where something paradoxical happens: the knowledge of Eros that Sokrates and Phaedrus have been unfolding word by word through the written text simply steps into a blind point and vanishes, pulling the *logos* in after it.⁶

As with the *Phaedo*, so too with the *Phaedrus*: the reader is made to encounter the transformative political possibilities at the very limits of *logos* itself. The collaborative reading that Socrates performs with Phaedrus uncovers for him, as it had for those gathered in the cell with Socrates on his final day, the danger endemic to the refusal, however tempting, to elide the limits of *logos* and allow the delusion of certain knowledge to settle in the soul. The *Phaedrus* is thus a powerful political dialogue because it opens us to the transformative possibility of collaborative reading by making us aware again of the erotic nature of *logos* itself, of its inexhaustible ability to render reality more just, beautiful, and better. If the Greek word for reading, *anagignōskein*, means to “know again” in the sense of “recognize,” what a reading of these dialogues enjoins us to recognize and invites us to experience is the transformative possibilities of speaking toward the just, the beautiful, and the good in sober recognition of their erotic elusiveness.⁷ Reading thus becomes political, and its activity, hermeneutics, is felt to extend beyond the encounter between reader and text into the realities of human being-together.

Platonic political writing inhabits the erotic space between the text and its reader as we seek together to articulate truth. As Socrates works with those he encounters, attempting to turn each toward the erotic ideals that animate his life, so too, the Platonic texts work with us,

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Carson emphasizes the connection between reading and the recognition of the elusiveness of the beginning, which, she reminds us, “cannot be placed in the control of the writer or reader. We should not forget that the Greek verb “to read” is *anagignōskein*, a compound of the verb “to know” (*gignōsken*) and the prefix *ana*, meaning “again.” If you are reading, you are not at the beginning” (*ibid.*, 152). Plato has Socrates return with Phaedrus to the beginning of the speech Lysias wrote to remind us readers that we are not at the beginning, that the beginning itself remains forever elusive and outside of our capacities of control.

generation after generation, attempting to cultivate in us a Socratic commitment to live the questions of justice, beauty, and the good. The practices of Socratic politics in the dialogues we have considered in the preceding pages are animated largely by a concern for justice, that erotic ideal that awakens in each individual a concern for the life of the community and for the ways spoken words can enrich or impoverish that life. The practices of Platonic political writing, because rooted in a picture of a Socrates “become beautiful and new,” are animated more by beauty, that alluring ideal most capable of drawing us outside of ourselves and toward one another through words well written and things well done. Although justice takes a certain precedence in the practices of Socratic political saying, and beauty in those of Platonic political writing, both the topology of Socratic politics and the topography of Platonic politics remain rooted in an abiding commitment to both justice and beauty and thus, ultimately, to the question of the good, that erotic ideal that calls our attention to the profound transformative possibilities the ideals themselves are capable of enacting through the lives of those committed to them. Platonic, like Socratic, politics is the practice of erotic idealism.

PLATONIC POLITICS

What began, then, as an attempt to illustrate the political nature of the philosophical life Socrates is shown to live in the dialogues has led to a picture of the political nature of Plato’s philosophical writing. The political practices of Platonic writing seem to be marked by a tension similar to the tension with which we began our investigation into the practices of Socratic politics. Recall that Socrates claims in the *Apology* that if he had attempted to do political things he would, long ago, have been killed even as, in the *Gorgias*, he claims to be one of the only citizens of Athens to “attempt the political art truly.”⁸ This tension was resolved by attending to the manner in which the politics Socrates practices with those he encounters is not the sort of activity most Athenians would have associated with a political life. The figure of Socrates presented in

⁸ *Apology*, 31d5–32a23; *Gorgias*, 521d6–e2. See also [Chapter 1](#).

the Platonic dialogues forces us to reconsider what it means to practice politics. For Socrates, the true art of politics is practiced each time we attempt to speak toward the best in our idiosyncratic encounters with one another. Similarly, the practices of Platonic writing uncovered in the preceding dialogues enjoin us to reconsider the nature of political writing itself. For in Plato's writing, we are invited to engage in a deeply political activity insofar as we are called to consider questions of justice, the beautiful, and the good and afforded an occasion to cultivate habits of thinking and imaginative response capable of integrating these questions into our relationships with one another. If the politics of Platonic writing is to remain true to its Socratic origins, it requires engaged collaborative reading – a politics of reading, that is, that refuses to remain contained within the dialogue between reader and text, but rather insists on integrating the attempt to speak and act toward the best into our relationships with all those we encounter.

But this, of course, is not what most people consider when they take up the study of Plato's political writings. In her book, *Why Plato Wrote*, Danielle Allen addresses Plato's political writing in terms that would have been familiar to the practices of traditional Athenian politics:

Plato wrote, among other purposes, to effect political change. Yes, Plato was the world's first systematic political philosopher, using text to record technical philosophical advances, but he was also, it appears, the western world's first think-tank activist and its first message man. He wrote – not solely but consistently – to change Athenian culture and thereby transform Athenian politics.⁹

This passage anticipates the central argument of Allen's book in which Plato is shown to have written dialogues in order to generate "surplus linguistic power as a means to acquire social power within his own city, ancient Athens of the fourth century BCE."¹⁰ On this view, Plato

⁹ Allen, *Why Plato Wrote*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6. The suggestion that Plato's Academy was a sort of "think-tank" is borrowed from Galen Rowe, who argues that the school "attempted to translate theoretical ideas about government into practice." See Rowe, "Two Responses by Isocrates to Demosthenes," 150. Karl Popper is, of course, famous for having read Plato as this sort of political operative. See Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. For her part, Allen's position emerges from an interest in tracing the influence ideas have on social processes; so when she noticed Platonic vocabulary and turns of phrase appearing in the speeches of contemporary

practices the politics of Callicles and Protagoras, Gorgias and Lysias, the politics, that is, of influence and manipulation. Although Allen does well to identify Platonic writing as at root political, her understanding of politics is decidedly un-Socratic. For Allen, the decision to write separates Plato from Socrates, who, save for his brief engagement with poetry at the beginning of the *Phaedo*, wrote nothing.

Yet however critical the differences are between Socratic speaking and Platonic writing, it does not decisively separate Plato from his teacher; rather, as we have argued throughout, the practices of Socratic political speaking are translated by Plato into the vernacular of writing; and even if they are thereby also transformed by the transition from the oral to the literary, there remains in the writing as much as in the speaking – indeed, in the writing of the speaking – a vision of politics rooted in the attempt to speak, write, and act toward the best and to empower others to orient their lives by a concern for the good. Indeed, Christopher Rowe emphasizes the tight connection between the Socrates who appears in the dialogues and Plato: “Plato *is* Socrates, except, unavoidably, to the extent that Plato as author is also Socrates’ creator and manipulator (manipulating him, that is, in a series of moves that he claims ultimately, and I claim, reasonably, to have derived from *him*).”¹¹ Leaving aside the necessarily vexed question of the historical Socrates, the claim “Plato *is* Socrates” is undeniable if it is meant to emphasize that the figure of Socrates who appears in the Platonic dialogues has been crafted by the author himself. But in this view, Plato is Protagoras and Gorgias and Callicles and Phaedrus and every other character around which the dialogues are staged. Rowe, however, goes perhaps too far when he insists that “[b]y and large, Socrates is Plato’s *portavoce*, his mouthpiece.”¹² It is not that Socrates speaks for Plato, but that the written words put into the mouths of Socrates and his interlocutors, and the actions depicted in the contexts in which the dialogues unfold, are designed to do with readers precisely what Socrates sought to do with those he encountered.

Athenian politicians, she traced this to the influence of Platonic writing and then posited this influence itself as the motivating force behind Plato’s decision to write.

¹¹ Rowe, *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing*, 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15. For a strong counterargument to this suggestion, see Nails, “Mouthpiece Schmouthpiece.”

If, therefore, Danielle Allen sets Plato too far apart from Socrates, Christopher Rowe brings Plato and Socrates too close together. Although Plato cannot be reduced to the Socrates who appears in his dialogues, neither can he be set so far apart from Socrates that the politics his writing practices becomes nothing more than a means by which to garner social and political influence in Athens of the fourth century BCE. The political practices of Platonic writing extend far beyond his contemporaries; for this is, indeed, one advantage, perhaps the main advantage, writing has over speaking: it has a permanence that allows it to address posterity and to continue to work long after the death of the author on those who encounter it. The *Phaedrus* suggests that Plato was himself aware of this advantage also as a danger, for Socrates is made to worry about what happens to a written text when it is bandied about by a Phaedrus who is incapable of discerning what is well and poorly written.¹³ We might surmise that Plato's decision to write was well informed and taken after long consideration – even if, as Diogenes Laertius has suggested, he consigned his tragic poetry to the flames on hearing Socrates speak.¹⁴ But the issue with which we have here been concerned is not so much to determine why Plato wrote – for to answer this would require insight into the intentions of a man long dead – but rather, to delineate the manner in which Platonic writing continues to be politically effective with those who take it up in the spirit of dialogue in which it was written. Platonic political writing, thus, requires a politics of reading in which our engagement with the text is no mere abstract academic exercise, but is, rather, permitted to influence the very course of our lives. If Platonic writing is political in a deep, Socratic sense, it enjoins an engaged politics of reading.

¹³ *Phaedrus*, 275d3–e3; see [Chapter 6](#).

¹⁴ Laertius, *Diogenes Laertius*, I:III.5–6. Kahn is right to insist: “[w]e do not know how Plato’s career as a writer began.” But he also goes on to speculate that it is “reasonable to suppose that the *Apology* came first, not long after the event of the trial . . .” See Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 101. Without endorsing the reason Kahn offers for this judgment – that the *Apology* is more historical than other dialogues – this speculation would reinforce the position of the *Apology* in the present book insofar as it is placed after the *Phaedo* in order to amplify the manner in which the *Apology* is a written response to the death of Socrates designed to do as much with the reader as it was to depict the failings of the Athenian citizenry.

The politics of reading, however, like that of Platonic writing, is rooted in the practices of Socratic politics we have been investigating. Socrates refused to practice politics in traditional ways, choosing instead to “do political things” by speaking on each occasion to each person he encountered in ways that were oriented “toward the best.”¹⁵ He did not, as he himself insisted in the *Apology*, “attempt to do political things” within the context of the traditional institutions of Athenian politics. Rather, his politics was practiced every day in every encounter he had. In writing dialogues, Plato follows Socrates in this even as he also parts with him in a rather decisive way. Plato follows Socrates insofar as the dramatic form of Platonic writing resists all attempts to distill from the texts an abstract set of political principles capable of fueling the institutional machinery of mass manipulation. Plato himself seems to have been worried about the political dangers endemic to such a distillation of the things ascribed to him when, as we have heard in the *Second Epistle*, he denies that there is or ever will be a writing of Plato.¹⁶ Even so, however, Plato parts with Socrates both in his willingness to write and in attempting to establish an institution – the Academy itself – that would have lasting political influence. The decision to write and the attempt to found an academy are not unrelated; both involve rooting one’s philosophical commitments in something more permanent and lasting than ephemeral speech, while each remains capable nonetheless of transforming the lives of individuals by turning them to questions of the just, the beautiful, and the good. The *Dialogues of Plato* have proven to be of more lasting influence and far more politically effective than the educational institution Plato established. Nevertheless, both the texts and the school were political in the specific sense that they sought to cultivate in each new generation of students the political habits Socrates sought to educe in each individual with whom he spoke.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Gorgias*, 521d6–e2.

¹⁶ *Second Epistle*, 314b7–c4.

¹⁷ Guthrie expresses no doubt or uncertainty in claiming that the Academy was created to train future statesmen in order to influence politics as traditionally practiced: “To produce political experts was undoubtedly his aim . . .” “It was certainly his intention that many of his pupils should leave the Academy for politics, not as power-seekers themselves, but to legislate or advise those in power . . .” See Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy IV: Plato: The Man and His Dialogues: Earlier Period*, 22–3. Malcolm Schofield is doubtful that we can make any confident claims about the political nature of the education students received in

Thus, Diogenes gets at something of the truth when he writes of Plato: “And in his own city he did not meddle with political affairs, although he was a practitioner of politics (*politikos*) to judge from his writings.”¹⁸ But to judge from his writings, as we have here attempted to do, is to discern a practice of politics deeply rooted in the practices of Socratic political speaking.

If the true art of Socratic politics was seen in the *Gorgias* to have three dimensions, perhaps these too can be discerned, although transformed, in the art of Platonic political writing. If so, these dimensions of Socratic political speaking will also lend deeper insight into the politics of reading to which the poetics of Platonic politics points. In the *Gorgias*, the practice of Socratic politics was shown to embrace the following three abilities: (1) to look into the nature of the one with whom one is engaged; (2) to act in ways informed by an understanding of what is responsible for the present condition; and (3) to thoughtfully anticipate what is best.¹⁹ In that dialogue, Socrates was shown to practice this art of politics with Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, with varying degrees of success. But what emerges, particularly in the way the relationship between Socrates and Gorgias is depicted, is a picture of what Socrates himself calls “a beautiful thing,” namely, the practice of a philosophical rhetoric intent on “preparing the souls of citizens such that they will be the best possible, and striving earnestly to say the best things, whether they are pleasing or more unpleasant to those listening.”²⁰ To prepare the souls of citizens in this way requires Socrates to engage in a different and in many ways more subversive political practice in which the things he says to each person he encounters are designed to cultivate in them a concern for the best. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates speaks again of the

the Academy. See Schofield, “Plato and Practical Politics.” But the suggestion here is not that the Academy was designed to serve the interests of traditional politics by training statesmen to influence regimes behind the scenes, but rather, that the Academy, as an educational institution, was designed to turn individuals toward an erotic concern for the just, the beautiful, and the good so that they might, on the basis of that concern, come to practice something like the erotic politics of Socrates. This remains, as it must, only a suggestion, for we are not here concerned to make any definitive claims about the structure of the education the Academy offered, but rather first to point to the connection between writing and the attempt to establish and administer an educational institution and second to point to both as a peculiar kind of political practice.

¹⁸ Laertius, *Diogenes Laertius*, I:III.23.

¹⁹ See *Gorgias* 501a1–3 and b2–5, [Chapter 3](#).

²⁰ *Gorgias*, 503a7–9, [Chapter 3](#).

beautiful when he suggests that writing is capable of sowing seeds in the soul of the individual. This writing would not be “in water,” a wasteful effort, but undertaken in order to sow seeds that will enrich the life of the individual and, by turn, of the community in which the individual lives.²¹ This writing, which Phaedrus rightly identifies as a beautiful kind of play, is rendered yet more beautiful, Socrates suggests, when put in the service of a “dialectical art” that selects an appropriate soul and cultivates speeches “that can defend both themselves and the one who planted them and that are not infertile but have seeds from which others grow in other places (*hothen alloi en allois ēthesi*) . . .”²² The talk of the beautiful in these passages points to that erotic ideal toward which Platonic writing is oriented and by which it enacts its political influence; for the texts are written in ways that defend themselves and the one who wrote them if those of us who read them are willing and able to take them into our lives in an active and imaginative way.

The art of Platonic writing does with us what the art of Socratic saying does with the citizens to whom it was originally addressed. Thus, the three abilities identified with the practice of Socratic politics find expression too in the practices of Platonic writing; for Platonic writing is able (1) to turn individuals toward new possibilities of relation; (2) to cultivate in its readers a hermeneutical imagination capable of diagnosing the limits of existing political realities; and (3) to model for us the difficulty and the need to put a vision of the just, the beautiful, and the good into compelling words capable of enriching our lives in community with others. These practices of Platonic political writing were themselves born of a transformative encounter with Socratic political speaking and thus remain conditioned by an ineluctable experience of finitude. Platonic writing, first and last, is of a Socrates “become beautiful and new,” of a Socrates who died attempting to speak truth toward justice. Thus, the contours of Platonic politics could only be discerned

²¹ *Phaedrus*, 276c6–d7. The phrase Socrates uses, “ἐν ὕδατι γράψει,” to write in water, is proverbial, meaning to waste one’s effort. See Yunis, *Plato: Phaedrus*, 233. The Cobb translation “in ink” has the effect of suggesting that Socrates is juxtaposing a writing in the literal sense with a writing on the soul in a more metaphorical sense. See Plato, *Plato’s Symposium and the Phaedrus: Plato’s Erotic Dialogues*, 134. However, Socrates does not mean to suggest that the writing on the soul cannot also involve a kind of literal writing; rather, what is contrasted is writing as wasteful play and writing as transformative play.

²² *Phaedrus*, 276e5–277a2, [Chapter 6](#).

by means of a deep engagement with the practices of Socratic political speaking. Now that the topology of Socratic politics has been shown to open a horizon from which the topography of Platonic politics may be experienced, it will be important to articulate the manner in which each of the abilities Platonic political writing seeks to cultivate makes a specific demand of us as readers. Platonic writing becomes political only in the political activity of reading. We have sought, in the preceding pages, to practice the art of political reading in order to demonstrate the manner in which Platonic writing itself is able to cultivate in us openness to new possibilities of relation, imaginative response abilities, and a concern for the erotic ideals of justice, beauty, and the good.

NEW POSSIBILITIES OF RELATION

In her book, *Plato's Phaedrus: A Defense of the Philosophic Art of Writing*, Ronna Burger suggests how, on the surface, Platonic writing *seems* incapable of addressing itself in a transformative way to the life concerns of the individual reader:

Through its imitation of the voice of Socrates, however, the Platonic dialogue acknowledges its own limitations, for the perfect fixity of the written word seems to exclude the possibility of living thought; the illusory objectivity of the product of writing seems to represent an obstacle to the particularity of the unique perspective of each reader, and the dead, written word seems incapable of incorporating the self-moving motion of soul.²³

Yet Plato seems to have developed a way of writing, the dialogue, capable of infusing the written word with dialectical life in the sense in which Socrates speaks of the beautiful dialectical art in the *Phaedrus*. Burger thus writes: "The ideal meeting point defined by the principles of dialectics, as the convergence of the two paths of *eros* and death, of living speech and writing, is in fact represented by the Platonic dialogue itself."²⁴ The convergence of *eros* and death in the Platonic dialogues

²³ Burger, *Plato's Phaedrus*, 109.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

underwrites the political efficacy of Platonic writing itself; for the erotic life of Socrates is, through the written word, capable of achieving a kind of earthly immortality in which the erotic effect of Socratic speaking is able to address each new generation of readers willing to actively listen. In his essay, *Phenomenology of Reading*, Georges Poulet suggests that “a book is not only a book, it is the means by which an author actually preserves his ideas, his feelings, his modes of dreaming and living. It is his means of saving his identity from death.”²⁵ But if this is true of books and their authors in general, it applies in a peculiar way to Platonic writing; for Plato preserves not only his ideas, feelings, and modes of dreaming and living but also those of his teacher, Socrates. As the writing of a “Socrates become beautiful and new,” Plato preserves, and in certain ways enhances, the efficacy of Socratic political speaking.

If in being written, Socratic politics relinquishes its capacity to look into the nature of the one with whom it is engaged, it gains a new capacity to open generations of readers to new possibilities of relation. Through Platonic writing, the Socratic voice addresses itself to us. E. N. Tigerstedt speaks of this dimension of Platonic writing as the “unique personal impersonality of the Platonic Dialogue.” He writes:

Plato’s own teaching is at one and the same time forbiddingly impersonal and compellingly personal. His Dialogues are discussions which are not addressed to any reader or which the reader is invited to join but to which he is admitted only as a silent listener. Yet, in a strange way, the same Dialogues are *argumenta ad hominem*, more impressive than most sermons. As we read them, it seems to us as if Nathan’s words to David were ringing in our ears: “Thou art the man.”²⁶

The impersonal dimension of the Platonic teaching is endemic to the medium through which it expresses itself: writing. This separates it from the personal practices of Socratic politics, which are always attuned to and tuned for the peculiar individual to whom Socrates speaks. Gadamer emphasizes this dimension of writing when he himself writes: “It could be said of every book – not just the famous one that makes

²⁵ Poulet, “Phenomenology of Reading,” 58.

²⁶ Tigerstedt, *Interpreting Plato*, 96.

this claim – that it is for everyone and no one.”²⁷ Yet Platonic writing, because it remains attentive to and expressive of the living voice of Socrates, is able to address itself to each of us *as the unique individuals we are*.

In addressing us as individuals, Platonic writing opens us also to that which is beyond ourselves. This occurs in our encounter with Platonic texts in a peculiar twofold manner. If, as Poulet emphasizes, all reading is “a way of giving way not only to a host of alien words, images, ideas, but also to the very alien principle which utters them and shelters them,” in reading Plato, we are also exposed to that most enigmatic originary figure, Socrates, who haunts the writing at every turn.²⁸ Platonic writing addresses each reader in a way that opens us to new possibilities of relation by painting a picture of Socrates failing and succeeding in his attempts to use words to persuade those he encounters to live the questions of justice, beauty, and the good. But this capacity of Platonic writing to address us requires a certain way of reading. Tigerstedt has thus perhaps an impoverished view of the hermeneutical situation when he insists that the reader is invited to join each Platonic dialogue but is admitted only as a silent listener. For reading is by nature collaborative. In the first instance, reading involves a dialogue between the text and the reader. Gadamer puts it this way: “All reading involves application, so that a person reading a text is himself part of the meaning he apprehends. He belongs to the text he is reading.”²⁹ Reading thus can never be an abstract intellectual activity, for the hermeneutical situation demands of us as readers that we bring ourselves to the text, putting our own possibilities in play as we allow ourselves to be moved by what we read.³⁰ Gadamer’s insistence that hermeneutics always involves application is rooted in the recognition that the work of interpretation is to render concrete the universal claims the texts makes on us.³¹ Thus,

²⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 160. The famous book to which Gadamer refers here is, of course, Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*.

²⁸ Poulet, “Phenomenology of Reading,” 57.

²⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 340.

³⁰ See *ibid.*, 388. See also [Chapter 4](#).

³¹ Gadamer says, “. . . we consider application to be just and integral a part of the hermeneutical process as are understanding and interpretation.” See *ibid.*, 308. Aristotle’s conception of *φρονήσις* or practical wisdom is the paradigm example of a mode of reasoning from which the question of application cannot be segregated. For Aristotle, practical

reading is collaborative in a second sense, for our attempts to interpret the text are always oriented also toward the community of readers to and with whom the text speaks. Be it in the classroom, in living conversation, or in writing, when we enter into hermeneutic dialogue with the text, we enter too into communication with one another in such a way that reading itself becomes capable of opening new possibilities of relation and community. Gadamer himself suggests that responsive, active reading opens a kind of public sphere:

In actual fact, writing is central to the hermeneutical phenomenon insofar as its detachment both from the writer or author and from a specifically addressed recipient or reader gives it a life of its own. What is fixed in writing has raised itself into a public sphere of meaning in which everyone who can read has an equal share.³²

The public sphere to which Gadamer here points is the very topography of Platonic politics, the place where it unfolds. Platonic texts are political not because they function as manifestos but because they open a public space in which we readers are invited to reconsider the manner in which our lives individually and in relation to one another are animated by and oriented toward those erotic ideals with which Socrates himself remained always concerned. Thus, although the ability to look into the nature of the one with whom one is engaged is lost in the translation from Socratic to Platonic politics, this latter has been shown to be capable of turning the engaged reader toward new possibilities of relation in the literary public sphere that itself conditions the concrete ways we live in community with one another.

IMAGINATIVE RESPONSE ABILITIES

The second dimension of the art of Socratic politics delineated above involves his ability to act in ways informed by an understanding of

wisdom involves the virtuous application of universal principles in particular situations. See *ibid.*, 312–24. Richard Bernstein puts it well when he says, “For *phronesis* is a form of reasoning and knowledge that involves a distinctive mediation between the universal and the particular.” See Bernstein, “From Hermeneutics to Praxis,” 828. For a detailed discussion of how *φρονήσις* functions in this sense, see Long, *The Ethics of Ontology: Rethinking an Aristotelian Legacy*, 131–51.

³² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 392.

what is responsible for the present condition of those with whom he is engaged. Here too something is lost and gained by the translation of Socratic politics into writing. Lost is an attuned sensitivity to the peculiar life history of the individual encountered; gained, however, is the cultivation of imaginative capacities that enable attuned readers to better diagnose the limits of the political realities in which we live. Platonic writing cultivates imaginative response abilities in its readers by confronting us with poignant pictures of Socrates' spectacular public failures and his more politically significant, if more intimate, interpersonal successes. If, in the *Protagoras*, Socrates is shown to fail in his attempt to establish a community of dialogue with Protagoras, he is shown to succeed in convincing Hippocrates to relinquish his desire to associate with the famous visitor from Abdera. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates fails to move Polus and Callicles toward the philosophical life even as he succeeds in establishing a friendship with Gorgias suggestive of the transformative power of a rhetoric erotically oriented toward justice. The *Phaedo* presents the failure of Socratic words in their attempt to prove the immortality of the soul only thus to demonstrate their dramatic success in creating a community of friends committed to truth. If the *Apology* illustrates a Socrates incapable of persuading a multitude, it evokes as well, in a minority of those depicted as present and in those of us capable of reading with empathy, a deep sense of the profound implications political injustice has for the individual unwilling to speak otherwise than toward the truth. And finally, although the *Phaedrus* charts a path outside the city walls, staging an intimate collaborative reading of a written text by two lovers of words, it nevertheless presents a profound political success insofar as Phaedrus is ultimately returned to the city committed to putting his words in the service of the ideals of justice and truth. The ultimate failure of this commitment appears only to those readers capable of stepping outside of the text of the *Phaedrus* so as to consider the historical failings of Phaedrus the individual, accused of profaning the Eleusinian mysteries in 415 BCE.³³ In depicting the public failures and intimate successes of Socrates in his attempts to speak toward the best with those he

³³ Nails, *The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics*, 232. See [Chapter 6](#).

encountered, Platonic writing, like Socratic speaking, shifts the site of politics from a grand, public scale to the more intimate sphere of interhuman connection.

Yet Platonic writing, like Socratic speaking, generates a surplus of political power that extends beyond the encounter between text and reader into a wider community of relationships. The reading of Platonic texts thus becomes what Wolfgang Iser has called a “living event.” The failures and successes of Socrates present themselves to us readers as opportunities to reflect on the conditions under which our own relationships with others unfold. Reading Plato, we are engaged in, as Iser puts it, a “continual oscillation between involvement and observation.”³⁴ This oscillation marks our experience of the text as a living event; but it also suggests the way reading is capable of cultivating certain habits of imaginative response. The Platonic text does this in a poignant and peculiar way, for it at once draws us intimately into the drama it unfolds even as it also refuses to allow us to relinquish our capacities of critical discernment. Thus, to take one example from the dialogues with which we have here been concerned, the *Phaedo* draws us into the drama of the final hours of Socrates’ life, amplifying the urgency of the situation by emphasizing the deep human desire for whatever solace might be found in some certain proof of the immortality of the soul; but the dialogue also forces its readers into a mode of critical observation by performing the failure of such proofs and inscribing the drama itself into an encounter between two people, Phaedo and Echecrates, whose relationship refuses to recede completely into the background. As we have read, the text reminds us in specific ways and at specific times that the things Socrates said to those gathered in the prison cell extend beyond themselves, first anchoring the relationship between Phaedo and Echecrates in a living concern to put words to our shared experience of finitude, and then reaching out to us readers in ways that challenge us to consider the manner in which we too might do things with words to enrich our relationships with others.

We experience the allure of Platonic dialogues even as they deploy distancing strategies of writing designed to diminish the aura of their

³⁴ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 128.

own authority.³⁵ In this sense, the written dialogues function much like the erotic ideals to which they so often appeal; for the dialogues present a figure of Socrates who is, like the ideals of justice, beauty, and the good themselves, at once alluring and elusive; and like our experience of those ideals, the allure of the Platonic Socrates is wholly saturated by an experience of his elusiveness.³⁶ Plato writes the figure of Socrates into the dialogues in ways that require us to experience him as a living ideal, however elusive and however flawed, who nevertheless models modes of speaking and acting capable of weaving a concern for justice, beauty and the good into his relationships with others. Exposing us to this ideal, Plato acclimates us to the experience of erotic ideals and challenges us to integrate that experience into our own relationships with others. As we move between involvement and observation, as the text draws us in and brings us up short, our creative and critical imaginative abilities are cultivated and we begin to learn how to respond to others with a concern for what is just and beautiful and good, wholly cognizant of our inability to fully grasp the nature of these erotic ideals themselves. The Platonic texts are written in ways that do things with us just as Socratic speech was articulated in ways that do things with those to whom it was addressed. But writing, like speaking, becomes ineffective if it is not actively engaged. Reading Plato requires an attuned hermeneutic imagination. Although speaking of reading in general, Iser articulates something of this dimension of reading Plato:

... the author and reader are to share the game of the imagination, and, indeed, the game will not work if the text sets out to be anything more than a set of governing rules. The reader's enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, i.e., when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play.³⁷

³⁵ For a more detailed discussion of this distancing strategy with reference specifically to the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, see Long, "Is There Method in This Madness? Context, Play and Laughter in Plato's *Symposium* and *Republic*," 177–91.

³⁶ Christopher Rowe emphasizes that we readers "generally speaking, are more like his audience than we are like Plato, or his Socrates. (One of the epithets Socrates' friends and associates attach to him in the dialogues is 'odd', 'strange' – *atopos*, literally 'out of place', 'outlandish'.)" See Rowe, *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing*, 30. For a discussion of the elusive strangeness of Socrates with Sean Kirkland, listen to Long, Christopher P., "Digital Dialogue 35: Socratic Strangeness" (http://www.cplong.org/digitaldialogue/digital_dialogue_35_socratic_strangeness/).

³⁷ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 108.

Although it would be impoverishing to reduce the Platonic texts to a set of governing rules, the point Iser emphasizes is important, for Platonic writing initiates a game of imagination with us in which our own powers of response – so as not to deploy the misguided vocabulary of “faculties” – are cultivated.

As we encounter Socrates in the *Protagoras* seek to draw Protagoras into dialogue with a gesture of friendship, asking Protagoras to be Odysseus to his Diomedes as they seek out the truth concerning the nature of human excellence, we learn something of the importance of friendship in the attempt to articulate truth.³⁸ When we are made to feel the frustration of Callicles and to experience his deep recalcitrance to any suggestion that his words might be more effective, indeed more powerful, if they were oriented toward justice rather than pleasure and influence, we are taught something of the limits of the power of words to enrich community.³⁹ When we laugh at the ludicrous suggestion that Socrates’ punishment for practicing philosophy in Athens should be public maintenance in Prytaneion, we are invited to consider the role philosophy ought to play in politics and to recognize how distorted our political life has become.⁴⁰ As we feel the excitement of Phaedrus as he goes off to commit a beloved text to memory, we are reminded of the erotic allure of ideas; and as we learn with Phaedrus how to reflect critically on what has been written without denuding the ideas of their erotic energy, we are made to recognize that the real value of reading is not simply to uncover the limitations and beautiful truths articulated by the text, but to translate the truths found there into our relationships with one another. If Henry James is right that successful works of art offer us “a miraculous enlargement of experience,” the art of Platonic writing enlarges our experience in ways that cultivate habits of thinking and creative abilities that enable us to respond well to one another and the wider community in which we live.⁴¹ Reading Plato empowers us to diagnose the limits of existing political realities; it offers us an experience on the basis of which to transform those realities by committing ourselves to the difficult practice of Socratic politics in which the words we

³⁸ *Protagoras*, 348c5–d1; see [Chapter 2](#).

³⁹ *Gorgias*, 482a5–483a3; see [Chapter 3](#).

⁴⁰ *Apology*, 37a1–2; see [Chapter 5](#).

⁴¹ James, *Theory of Fiction*, 92.

speaking to one another and the actions we undertake together are animated always by a concern for justice and what is best.

EROTIC IDEALS

The third dimension of the art of Platonic political writing parallels the third dimension of the art of Socratic political speaking; for if Socratic politics involved the ability to thoughtfully anticipate what is best, Platonic political writing invites us to recognize the need for and the limits of our attempts to speak and act in ways animated by the erotic ideals of justice, beauty, and the good. Again, the figure of Socrates is decisive, for he claimed to understand nothing other than “erotic things,” and never claimed determinate knowledge of the Ideas.⁴² The picture of Socrates offered to us by the dialogues and traced in some detail in the preceding pages is that of a human being assiduously committed to these ideals precisely as capable of transforming his life and the lives of those he encountered. The *Phaedo* is so powerful a dialogue in part because it demonstrates the manner in which Socrates never succumbed to the temptation to embrace the pretense of knowledge in order to gain some solace in the face of finitude. It is a compelling *political* dialogue because it demonstrates precisely how a community of people committed to speaking truth can be sustained and enriched even as they confront and experience the ultimate limits of human life. The political efficacy of this dialogue, however, is actualized on a far broader and historically more extensive level by its having been written. The written words of the *Phaedo* compel its readers in a provocative way to put our commitment to the erotic principles of justice, beauty, and the good into words capable of transforming and enriching our relationships with one another. Thus, the *Phaedo* is the fulcrum of this book because, encountering it, we are made to experience at once the limits of words *and* their power to transform a community willing to speak and act toward the ideals of justice, beauty, and the good, however elusive they must necessarily remain.

⁴² *Symposium*, 177d8. For a discussion of the importance of this claim and its connection to Socratic philosophical discourse, see Roochnik, “The Erotics of Philosophical Discourse.”

But what the *Phaedo* performs with us, its readers, each dialogue performs in a certain way with each of us who read with a willingness to be taught the imperative to speak toward the best in a world in which the best, as an erotic ideal, has been almost completely eclipsed by a concern for the expedient. The inaccessibility of the erotic ideals to which Socrates repeatedly appealed despite his own deep recognition of their elusiveness has come to determine our relationships with one another. If justice, beauty, and the good remain forever ideals beyond the grasp even of those who seek them, how can they in any way enrich the finite world of human affairs? The life of Socrates stands against this received cynicism, confident only in the recognition that by stretching ourselves out toward such ideals, however elusive they must remain, we are able to cultivate a world, if not just, beautiful, and good, then at least more just, more beautiful and better. Socratic philosophy is the practice of politics. Yet, for its part, the political work of Platonic writing, by staging for us a compelling encounter with the figure of Socrates as he puts this erotic idealism into practice, is to cultivate in us abilities to think and speak and live toward the best so as to enable us to bring something of the good into the world in which we together live. Platonic politics is the practice of philosophy undertaken each time we take up a dialogue and engage together in the imaginative activity of collaborative reading.

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