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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Poetic Philosophy in Plato and Zhuangzi

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

by

Ryan J. Harte

June 2020

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Lisa Raphals, Chairperson

Dr. Perry Link

Dr. Yang Ye

Dr. Zina Giannopoulou

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2020

The Dissertation of Ryan J. Harte is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've always liked this remark from Cornel West: "I am who I am because somebody loved me." It would be impractical to list everyone whose love in one way or another sustained me throughout my academic trip thus far, but a few names deserve outstanding mention: Kathleen ("mom") for everything, Aunt Julie for getting all "*verklemt*" when I got into college, Tim for actually choosing to be my brother, Carly for seeing me and being seen, Sean for the sustenance of true friendship and the scraping heart-to-hearts, Wing for lung-fulls of fresh air when I needed them early on, and Ariel for the love and the generosity and the desert—in other words, for making southern California not only bearable but sometimes beautiful.

The first question my supervisor, Lisa Raphals, asked upon meeting me in-person was whether I had food in my fridge and an acceptable place to sleep. My endless thanks to her for recognizing that there is a whole person attached to the scholar. Graduate students talk, and so I am keenly aware of my good fortune in having an advisor with whom I can openly disagree, caustically joke, and enjoy a meal (usually generously cooked by her). I am so glad my expansive search years ago turned me on to her. I write a lot about form, and she has been formative.

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I am indebted to the generosity of Yang Ye, whose pure delight in the beauty of literature and language is something the academic humanities need more of. He has always been ready to share feedback on my half-baked essays and ideas, always willing to sit and comb through the details of a text, but also to just visit and get to know me. In particular, his willingness to guide me through Classical Chinese was indefatigable. Having been his TA for several years, I can say that his love of fine literature is infectious: undergraduates sense it, and I have learned much from him. His encouragement to flex my creative muscles in the dissertation was welcome—any disastrous results are my own fault.

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Thomas Sorensen has listened to this entire dissertation. "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity." I love his generosity, among much else.

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of Herman Sinaiko.

He taught me how to read.

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Poetic Philosophy in Plato and Zhuangzi

by

Ryan J. Harte

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program Comparative Literature  
University of California, Riverside, June 2020  
Dr. Lisa Raphals, Chairperson

This dissertation argues that written form is essential, not accessory, to philosophical content, with particular focus on Plato and Zhuangzi. In the case of these two thinkers, the written forms they have left us are what I call poetic: full of metaphor, imagery, narrative, and so on—characterized in largely by a lack of systematic analysis. Attending to form thus entails (1) expanding our notion of what counts as philosophically meaningful and (2) radically different interpretations of what Plato and Zhuangzi are up to—i.e., reading their forms as inherently meaningful rather than as containers for preconceived notions of Platonism or Daoism. The dissertation speaks, hopefully, to audiences in comparative literature, philosophy (especially the history of philosophy), classics, and sinology.



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## PREFACE

子曰：「予欲無言。」子貢曰：「子如不言，則小子何述焉？」子曰：「天何言哉？四時行焉，百物生焉，天何言哉？」

Confucius said, “I desire to be wordless.”

Zi Gong said, “But, master—if you don’t talk, then what will we disciples transmit?”

Confucius said, “Does Heaven talk? Hmm? The four seasons come and go, everything springs up, but does Heaven ever talk?”

*Analects of Confucius*, 論語 17.19

This dissertation argues that written form is essential, not accessory, to philosophical content, with particular focus on Plato and Zhuangzi. My starting premise is that form is an instantiation of ideas or content, not a container for them. When we attend to Plato’s and Zhuangzi’s forms, we come away with a different Plato and Zhuangzi than we are used to. I propose what I call poetic philosophy in contrast to most modern professional philosophy. By “poetic” here I refer to Aristotle’s sense of “poetics”: an interest in *how* a text does what it does rather than in *what* a text means. “Stylistics” or “formalism” capture somewhat of what I mean. I have opted for “poetic philosophy” because I want the resonance of that word: poetic, *poiēsis* (“to make, fabricate”). I also want to challenge our distinctions between poetry and philosophy, and so any discomfort that “poetic philosophy” evokes is probably deliberate. I rely on a broad notion of “form,” including written style but extending to the large idea that seeing how some form hang together *is* the fundamental experience of meaning itself. Here I draw on the largely neglected field of gestalt theory, which has in recent years benefitted from much experimental research, and which helps me treat form itself as a comparative category.

Chapter One will give an overview of my theoretical approach, my poetic philosophy, as well as briefly look at how this approach differs from typical approaches to Plato and Zhuangzi. Chapter Two is a poetic reading of Plato's *Phaedrus* with special attention to (1) its torqued unity as a poetic text and (2) Plato's intertextual use of lyric poets Stesichorus and Sappho. Chapter Three zooms out to discuss more general affinities between Platonic metaphysics and gestalt thought, including a poetic model of truth as a kind of coherence. Chapter Four builds on this model of truth and offers my theory of metaphor not as decoration but as a way of saying something true; I then apply that to argue for Plato's Theory of the Forms as a poetic metaphor. Chapter Five turns to Zhuangzi and shows how many of the same themes from Plato (knowledge as perception rather than analysis, for example) show up in the *Qi wu lun* 齊物論. Chapter Six expands this discussion to several of the famous skill stories in the *Zhuangzi*, which not only show some of poetic philosophy's basic tenants but also blur several dichotomies that commonly distort the text (e.g., theory versus practice, mind versus body). The Conclusion recaps the project and suggests a direction for future work.

Finally, a brief note on the structure and division of the dissertation. By sheer happenstance, my suspicion that the form of a text should be primary in any interpretation arose in reading Plato long before I was ever exposed to early Chinese philosophy. I have had at least an extra decade's worth of thinking about these issues in Plato than in Zhuangzi—which is not to say that I have just taken a problem in Plato and thrown it onto Zhuangzi. Indeed, one of my hopes is that this project as a whole makes an argument for form as a comparative category. My theories of metaphor and of truth

apply to both thinkers but get explained in the Plato half, which helps account for why there are more Plato chapters. That said, Plato was my philosophical first love, and there is not much use in trying to hide that fact here—even as I carry on a torrid love/hate affair with Zhuangzi.

One of my favorite images in the *Phaedrus* is that of the soul after it has seen the beautiful beloved and sprouted wings:

ἦν ὅταν τὸ τῆδέ τις ὄρων κάλλος, τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἀναμνησκόμενος, περῶταί τε καὶ ἀναπτερούμενος προθυμούμενος ἀναπτέσθαι, ἀδυνατῶν δέ, ὄρνιθος δίκην βλέπων ἄνω, τῶν κάτω δὲ ἀμελῶν, αἰτίαν ἔχει ὡς μανικῶς διακείμενος<sup>1</sup>

Seeing something of beauty here on earth, remembering true beauty, he sprouts wings and desires to spread them and fly, but he cannot. Fixing his gaze upward and neglecting things below, he is accused of madness.

My scholarly training has taken place in classics, sinology, philosophy, interdisciplinary humanities, and literary criticism. My ideas have grown, entangled, across all these disciplines, and the end result is a comparative, interdisciplinary project that will fully satisfy no single field. I think I am on to something in this dissertation, but I certainly understand if I look like the avian soul: precariously trying to take off without going anywhere, quite mad to any passersby.

*Nota Bene:* As someone who has written a dissertation on form, I resent and disapprove of the required formatting for this dissertation. The length is monstrous enough without needing to double-space things and add outsized margins.

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<sup>1</sup> *Phr.* 249d.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: FORM AND POETIC PHILOSOPHY

In philosophy one thinks only metaphorically.

Louis Althusser, *Éléments d'autocritique*

After sex & metaphysics, —  
...what?  
What you have made.

Frank Bidart, 'The Third Hour of the Night', *Star Dust*

In the end it may be true that poets are unacknowledged legislators. The poet is the stone that drops in the still pond of philosophy; professional philosophers are the spreading, concentric rings.

Eric Bentley, *A Century of Hero-Worship*

### §1, Preamble

I begin with a straightforward question: why are there so many different ways to write things? It seems significant that one can write a love letter or a marriage contract, a theological treatise or a hymn, an epic narrative or a lyric song. *How* we say things is intimately and unavoidably entangled with *what* we mean. This dissertation is an attempt to think about that entanglement in the specific cases of Plato's *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi*.

Plato and Zhuangzi say what they say in writing, which is also true of almost every philosopher whose ideas remain to us. Despite this fact, modern professional philosophy almost never attends to the written *form*, to questions of *how* things say what they say—what we may call the poetics of philosophy. Philosophy seeks out arguments, claims, counterclaims, and conclusions, all of which are pinpointed and extracted from a text

without much attention to style or form. I believe that inattention to form leaves us with a myopic philosophy that fails to account for much of human life and also is inadequate to the understanding of ancient texts. This dissertation thus faces several disciplines—philosophy, classics, sinology, comparative literature.

When it comes to classics and sinology, I do not believe that an inattention to form *per se* is the problem. Classicists and sinologists show admirable attention to textual form. This is especially true considering the influence of philology in classics and the ever-rising importance of excavated texts in sinology. The problem is that when classics and sinology deal with philosophical texts, form is not ignored but rather studied *in order to* say something about philosophy. In other words, written form becomes a means to an end, a container for philosophical or ideological content.<sup>1</sup> I call this a teleological reading, one that subsumes form to content while *seeming* to pay attention to form. Teleological reading has seeped into philosophy over the last thirty years, particularly with respect to Plato, and more recently, Zhuangzi.<sup>2</sup> Philosophers exculpate themselves of literary insensitivity by trying to explain how Plato’s dramatic dialogues or Zhuangzi’s fables relate to their various philosophical arguments. The question for these philosophers is not “*what does Plato’s form mean?*” but rather “*what does Plato’s form tell us about the theory he’s trying to lay out?*”. Form is understood as a means to an end.

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<sup>1</sup> Wohl 2015 lays out this tendency in classics and also calls for classicists to adopt some methods from new formalism, a movement in literary theory from the last decade that, generally speaking, holds form and content to be inseparable.

<sup>2</sup> See Gadamer 1980 and 1991, Derrida 1981, Gonzalez 1995, Press 1995, 1999, Clay 2000, Griswold 2001, Rowe 2003 and 2007, Schur 2014 for just a sampling of single works and major collections. Studies with explicit attention to form in early Chinese philosophy are still rare in professional philosophy, but see Gentz and Meyer 2015 for a leading example.

Sometimes, classicists and sinologists attend so exclusively to form—the excavated manuscript, textual variants, historical context, etc.—that they fail to hear the resonances of that form. The problem is less one of teleological reading than of failing to give form its full importance. *This* tendency has decidedly not trickled over into philosophy. The problem here is that form is not understood to be philosophically meaningful at all. As a generalization, let us say that philosophy tends toward teleological readings and that classics-sinology tend towards treating form obsessively but in a limited, non-philosophical way. Both cases uphold the dichotomy between form and content—it is this very dichotomy that I want to problematize in my readings of Plato and Zhuangzi.

In addition to its split audiences, then, this dissertation has split goals. First, I try to say something novel about the *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi*: if we attend to their form as meaningful, we are left with a Plato and a Zhuangzi rather different from those we are used to. Second, I try to show through my examples of Plato and Zhuangzi why a philosophy deaf to form is impoverished and insufficient to reading ancient texts. This second goal, articulating my criticism of modern professional philosophy, often lurks in the background while my focus is on the *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi*, but it is *the* driving motive of the dissertation. Why Plato and Zhuangzi, then? One answer is that their written texts are the finest examples I know for showing how modern professional philosophy is inadequate for reading the ancients. Another answer: love. My personal love for Plato and Zhuangzi compels me to save them from what I see as gross misreadings. The threadbare philosophy I criticize mistreats many writers, but these two are *my* writers. And this is not a mere autobiographical point. As will become clear, attention to

particular attachments and desires is an important part of the expanded philosophy I advocate.

This introductory chapter first sketches why I find modern professional philosophy inadequate to reading Plato and Zhuangzi and how these inadequacies reflect even larger problems in philosophy itself. I offer poetic philosophy as an alternative, and I try to describe briefly what a poetic philosophical reading would look like. I end with a more focused review of how most attempts to read Plato and Zhuangzi have fallen into the traps of modern philosophy, and how my reading differs from them.

## **§2, Form**

Poetic philosophy, in short, seeks to avoid the dichotomy between form and content by showing how form is itself meaningful rather than just a container for or an ornamentation to meaning. This is not just an argument for literary studies but actually bears heavily on modern professional philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

The separation of form and content is not a new phenomenon, but we moderns cling to these conceptual categories with a tightness that distorts our encounters with antiquity. Theologian David Tracy characterizes modern thought with a series of dichotomies that impede our ability to read ancient philosophy: feeling and thought, form and content, practice and theory.<sup>4</sup> Modern professional philosophy emphasizes thought, content, and theory while devaluing or ignoring feeling, form, and practice. Tracy notes

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<sup>3</sup> One of the more recent breakout stars of contemporary literary studies is “New Formalism,” which basically holds that content is in form. Levinson 2007 is the watershed piece on this movement. Most of this work, however, has been strongly confined to English and literature departments, without much application to philosophy or antiquity.

<sup>4</sup> Tracy 1998.



that “all three of these peculiarly modern divisions are related to one another.”<sup>5</sup> The ancients and medievals deployed versions of these distinctions for specific purposes, but we moderns have enshrined them as ossified barriers.<sup>6</sup>

The gap between feeling and thought has been the most bridged in the last few decades, largely thanks to the work of Martha Nussbaum, Iris Murdoch, and other philosophers who have led the way in the subfield of philosophy of emotion (not to mention progress on the scientific front, which seems to increasingly suggest the importance of emotions in rational cognition).<sup>7</sup> Many of these same philosophers have also helpfully battered down the walls between practice and theory, especially in studies of ancient philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

The form-content distinction, however, has gone largely untouched by professional philosophy because questions of form have traditionally been viewed as merely stylistic and relegated to literary studies. But Tracy highlights the importance of form as a philosophical category: “the idea of the real as, in essence, its appearance in form and its availability to all education-as-formation in and through the many forms

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>6</sup> On the ancients, see Hadot 1995. For the canonical scholarship on these dichotomies as they evolved throughout medieval Europe, see Leclercq 1961 and Chenu 1968. I should also note that I am referring here to European intellectual history. Although I devote half this dissertation to China, my discussion engages largely with scholarship produced in “Western,” English-speaking traditions. This is because, as mentioned above, much of my quarrel is with modern professional philosophy as practiced in the English-speaking world.

<sup>7</sup> For more on this large topic see Brady 2013, Evans and Cruse 2004, and Nussbaum 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Nussbaum 1986 and 1990, Hadot 1995 and 2002. For more contemporary work that draws on Hadot to productively trouble the theory-practice distinction, see Arnold I. Davidson, in particular his recent and forthcoming work on improvisation and spiritual exercises.

disclosive of Form itself.”<sup>9</sup> For the ancients, knowledge of reality (the gods, Truth, Being, whatever) is ultimately a knowledge of form. Both the concrete and the abstract are apprehended through *form*, “whether in sensuous image as in Greek sculpture; in mathematics as in Pythagoras; in the forms of tragedy that render some aesthetic harmony even to chaos and strife; and above all, through the ancient philosophical turn to reflective form in the soul or mind.”<sup>10</sup> Form is an objective manifestation of principles like harmony, rhythm, space, order (or chaos)—none of these abstractions appear to us without taking some form. This helps explain why ancient notions of education view education not merely as the depositing of knowledge but as the shaping of the individual as a *formation*.<sup>11</sup> Because the ancient Greek gods are not themselves the creators of the world, even they too require form to exist—the Christian or Jewish God is formless, but we know the color of Athena’s eyes.

I mention Tracy here to emphasize that form is not some pleasant decoration of content but rather that form makes possible any experience of content at all. Any truth, any idea, any experience, even experience *itself*—these only touch us through form. A similar relationship holds for the other dichotomies Tracy lists: we experience theory only through practice: “philosophy...was for the ancients, above all, a love of wisdom, an attempt at a unity of thought and a way of life.”<sup>12</sup> What made a philosopher a

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<sup>9</sup> Tracy 1998, 237.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The classic, and still inspiring, study of this topic is Jaeger’s magisterial *Paideia* (Jaeger 1945).

<sup>12</sup> Tracy 1998, 238.

philosopher was the life he lived.<sup>13</sup> The theories, doctrines, proofs, and arguments that modern philosophy seizes upon and teaches were, to the ancients, a useful model that informed or illuminated their daily practice and nothing more.

This holds true, I think, for China too, and modern Western philosophers often apply their same false dichotomies to early China. Dirk Meyer explains philosophy in early China thus:

...something that carries an element of performance. It is an *act* of philosophising. As praxis-oriented activity, it is a real-world experience rather than a purely theoretical undertaking, and this is where the paradox lies. While there is an urge to communicate the experience of truth to the world, that action generally requires intellectualisation, systematisation and categorisation. But systematising truth means putting it into a rigid framework, which bears the danger of reducing it to an arbitrary set of definitions.<sup>14</sup>

Meyer's understanding of early Chinese thought aligns nicely with what Pierre Hadot says about Western antiquity: that philosophy should be primarily understood as a way of life. This is not to dismiss theory entirely—reflective abstraction is not only unavoidable for humans but enriching and beautiful. However, as Hadot and others in his wake (Foucault, Nussbaum, Davidson, etc.) have convincingly shown, in modern professional philosophy, theory has eclipsed practice. Tracy draws our attention to the fact that much the same has happened to form.

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<sup>13</sup> Hadot 1995 and 2002. See also Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, especially vol. 2, *The Use of Pleasure* and vol. 3, *The Care of the Self* (Foucault 1980–1986).

<sup>14</sup> Meyer 2015, 298. To see a more unpacked version of his argument about philosophy as praxis, see Meyer 2014.

“*Why should philosophy concern itself with form?*” Several reasons. First, philosophy at least since the time of Plato exists for us as an almost entirely written enterprise.<sup>15</sup>

Nussbaum points this out in the following:

How should one write, what words should one select, what forms and structures and organization, if one is pursuing understanding? (Which is to say, if one is, in that sense, a philosophy?) Sometimes this is taken to be a trivial and uninteresting question. I shall claim that it is not. Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters. Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth.<sup>16</sup>

“How should one write?” Plato could have written tragedies. They were the prestige genre of intellectual life in his day. He could have also written prose treatises, or epic verse, or gnomic aphorisms à la Heraclitus. Instead he opted to invent a new genre—dramatic dialogues. The *Zhuangzi*, even more than the Platonic dialogues, is singular in its written form among early Chinese texts. Poetic philosophy takes this choice seriously and does not see the written form as incidental to meaning. Critic George Steiner elegantly articulates the position:

It follows that philosophy and literature occupy the same generative though ultimately circumscribed space. Their performative means are identical: an alignment of words, the modes of syntax, punctuation (a subtle resource). This is as true of a nursery rhyme as it is of a Kant *Critique*. Of a dime novel as of the *Phaedo*. They are deeds of language. The notion, as in Nietzsche or Valéry, that abstract thought can be danced is an allegoric conceit. Utterance, intelligible enunciation is all. Together they solicit or withstand translation, paraphrase, metaphrase and every technique of transmission or betrayal.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that when we philosophize we are all always writing. Such a view would exclude most of what goes on in classrooms and pubs from philosophy. I just mean to say that, as far as modern professional philosophy goes, philosophy is mostly a written thing. Or, at the very least, the history of philosophy is a history of written texts.

<sup>16</sup> Nussbaum 1990, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Steiner 2011, 10.

Philosophy and literature are made of the same stuff, and so there is no reason in principle why we cannot ask after the form of philosophy the way we ask after the form of a poem. I disagree with Steiner on one crucial point, however, and this disagreement gets at the crux of things.

When Steiner says that “[u]tterance, intelligible enunciation is all,” he reveals a view of human thought that infuses modern professional philosophy: the idea that all philosophically valuable or meaningful thought is articulable in language. Steiner makes this point as a way of drawing attention to the similarities between philosophy and literature but in the process espouses a claim I want to dismantle: “All philosophic acts, every attempt to think thought...are irremediably linguistic.”<sup>18</sup> The idea that any meaningful or philosophically valuable thought must be linguistic runs deep in modern professional philosophy, and it implies commitments to a certain model of human thought that I think is wrong. By clinging to this model, modern professional philosophy starves itself of many sources of meaning and so only attends to a limited slice of overall human experience.

If all meaningful thought is linguistic, then all meaningful thought should also be analyzable and subject to logical systems. Language itself is a rule-governed system that can be broken down and that conforms to logic. Poetic philosophy holds that there is meaningful thought that does not fall into logical-analytic systems. Plato and Zhuangzi are often accused of self-contradiction or of vagueness precisely because they do not conform to the logical-analytic systems in which modern professional philosophy

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<sup>18</sup> Steiner 2011, 9.

traffics.<sup>19</sup> So the problem, as mentioned above, is twofold: (1) the standard model of philosophy is inadequate to deal with these ancient texts, and (2) the alternative model of poetic philosophy will also be more truthful to human experience generally. All of this requires lots of unpacking, so let me begin from some basic assumptions.

### **§3, Basic Premises**

Dimensions of our lives escape us. Let us agree at least that we are not always aware of everything. We receive a dizzying array of sensory data, much of which we ignore or filter out. Our memories come and go, often against our will. Various experiences go unperceived yet influence us nonetheless. We think with logical reasoning and argumentation, but also with intuition, feeling and emotion, leaps of the imagination, and even with our bodies. The focus of our awareness is limited and cannot encompass every aspect of our existence at all times. Even within the sphere of our active, conscious striving, we cannot reliably know what we want to know, do what we want to do, and in the end we all must die. This is a basic condition in which all humans find ourselves, although our articulations of this condition, our explanations for it, and our responses to it all vary a great deal by both individual and culture. Poetic philosophy begins from this point.

Logical-analytic systems are not up to the task of capturing what I'm describing here. For example, no decent academic philosophy journal in North America would let stand an argument based on intuition alone and without some form of rigorous logical

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<sup>19</sup> I use the name "Zhuangzi" for stylistic convenience. The fact that a singular figure named Zhuangzi did not write the *Zhuangzi* will be discussed in detail below.

argument. I don't want to disparage rigorous logical argument, but I do want to point out that sometimes intuition alone is all we have. Sometimes our feelings or bodily instincts clue us into something true and real even if we cannot articulate it in language, even if we cannot defend this truth in the court of analytic reason. Poetic philosophy is my attempt to describe a philosophy that can take seriously these ineffable experiences—that is, experiences that resist language and logic and analysis.

*“Okay, fine. It's hard to put some things into words. What does this have to do with form and Plato and Zhuangzi?”* I suspect that Plato and Zhuangzi recognized the picture of human imperfection I sketched above (in fact, much ancient philosophy probably did). In the *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi* in particular, I think this view of human experience shines through in the content and the written form. But this is in some sense beginning at the end. Let me first explain what I mean by accusing philosophy of only attending to logical-analytic systems in language so as to avoid a straw man. After I sketch my understanding of philosophy, I will be in a better position to offer an alternative.

#### **§4, Analytic Thought**

“Analytic thought” is the broad term I want to use for a type of cognition that is calculative, that proceeds according to logic and analysis, that operates in language, that we might call rational. Modern professional philosophy is the discipline most representative of analytic thought, and so my remarks about philosophy should also be

understood as remarks about analytic thought generally.<sup>20</sup> The next section will contrast analytic thought with gestalt thought.

A comprehensive critical overview of modern professional philosophy is far beyond my scope here. In the interests of time and space, I rely on a few representative examples that are paradigmatic of the discipline and of analytic thought. Any reader reasonably familiar with modern professional philosophy in the Anglosphere should recognize the practice in these examples. In brief, I believe that modern professional philosophy relies uncritically on a model of analytic thinking that evolved across the Scientific Revolution (16th century), the Enlightenment (17th century), and the Industrial Revolution (18th century) and has since become enshrined as the default model of thought.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the single most influential voice in the history of philosophy to articulate analytic thought is René Descartes. Consider the following passage, which articulates his philosophical program from his *Discourse on Method*:

The first rule was never to accept anything as true unless I recognized it to be *certainly and evidently* such... The second was *to divide* each of the difficulties which I encountered into as many parts as possible, and as might be required for an easier solution. The third was *to think in an orderly fashion* when concerned with the search for truth...even treating, as though ordered, materials which were not necessarily so. The last was...always to make enumerations so complete, and reviews so general, that I would be certain nothing was omitted. Those long chains of reasoning, so simple and easy, which enabled the geometricians to reach the most difficult demonstrations, had made me wonder *whether all*

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<sup>20</sup> Neither in “analytic thought” nor in “modern professional philosophy” am I referring to what many academics call “analytic philosophy” in contrast to “continental philosophy.” I am unconcerned with this distinction for my purposes here (if, in fact, it is much of a distinction at all—see Rorty 2007, Chapter 8 and Critchley 2001).

<sup>21</sup> I follow a much larger and more detailed argument laid out by Jan Zwicky in her magnum opus *Lyric Philosophy* (Zwicky 1995), from which I also borrow several examples. Her scope is wider and more historical than mine, and I repurpose her argument for my own ends here.



*things knowable to men might not fall into a similar logical sequence...* there cannot be any propositions so abstruse that we cannot prove them...<sup>22</sup>

Descartes describes the role of analysis in modern philosophy: dividing things into their composite parts, which assumes that meaning is not lost even by the breaking-up of the whole. From this springs the belief that the content of an idea is somehow separable from its form, that the meaning of some whole can be preserved even if the whole is examined only piecemeal, each part in isolation. The Cartesian influence on philosophy is further evidenced in the urge to treat “as though ordered, materials which were not necessarily so.” Meaning is imposed from without, order and sequence foisted onto materials that are not naturally so sequenced, which is, again, an inattention to form. Finally, Descartes bequeaths to philosophy a drive to make knowledge more and more general in the assumption that abstraction away from particulars tends toward truth.<sup>23</sup> The ultimate model of knowledge here is the geometer whose abstract axioms can be equally applied to any situation.<sup>24</sup>

Several centuries later, A.J. Ayer, whose *Language, Truth and Logic* in many ways heralded the arrival of analytic philosophy, wrote the following:

But, actually, the validity of the analytic method is not dependent on any empirical, much less any metaphysical, presupposition about the nature of things. For the philosopher, as an analyst, is not directly concerned with the physical properties of things. He is concerned only with the way in which we speak about them.

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<sup>22</sup> Descartes 1960 [1637], 15–16. My italics. My point is not that Descartes is responsible for the rise of analytic thought in early modernity but that as an influential historical figure, his articulation of it went on to become something of a paradigm.

<sup>23</sup> Orthodox scholarship blames this on Plato, but as Chapter Two argues, Plato, at least in the *Phaedrus*, never actually abandons particularity in favor of abstraction.

<sup>24</sup> Roochnik 1990 gives an idiosyncratic but thorough overview of this ideal in both Descartes and Spinoza. He also specifically addresses the idea of abstract and dispassionate knowing as the ideal in philosophy.

In other words, *the propositions of philosophy are not factual, but linguistic in character*—that is, that do not describe the behaviour of physical, or even mental, objects; they express definitions, or the formal consequences of definitions. Accordingly, *we may say that philosophy is a department of logic*. For we shall see that the characteristic mark of a purely logical enquiry is that it is concerned with the formal consequences of our definitions and not with questions of empirical fact.<sup>25</sup>

We can distill several features of modern philosophy from these remarks. First, philosophy tends to recognize as meaningful only those experiences that can be rendered in language. Second, philosophy is understood to be “a department of logic,” an extreme notion that even many philosophers might balk at. Anything that cannot be logically rendered would seem to be unsuitable for philosophizing. Where does this leave things like love, beauty, and wisdom? What philosophy *does* do, according to Ayer, is prop up science (Descartes makes similar claims):

What confronts the philosopher...is the task of clarifying the concepts of contemporary science... If he is incapable of understanding the propositions of any science, then he is unable to fulfill the philosopher's function in the advancement of our knowledge... What we must recognize is that it is necessary for a philosopher to become a scientist, in this sense, if he is to make any substantial contribution towards the growth of human knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

Philosophy is the handmaid to science in this view, using logic to clarify the workings of science with the goal of helping it progress onward to ever greater achievements. Ayer's view pushes aside too much of human thought, too much of what philosophy should engage with.

Here is part of the entry for “philosophy” in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, for decades a standard reference work of the discipline:

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<sup>25</sup> Ayer 1952, 57. My italics.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 153.

Of all forms of critical discussion, the most developed is certainly science. It is not surprising, therefore, that philosophers have taken a quite special interest in the structure of scientific discussion. At the other extreme, *ethical, aesthetic, and political discussions are notoriously unsatisfactory*. The philosopher interests himself in such topics as the good, the beautiful, and the public interest, *just because* the mechanism for discussing differences of opinion about them strikes him as being inadequate... But except for the fact that the nature of moral discussion is particularly difficult to analyze, on the face of it *there is no reason why philosophers should take any special interest in rectitude or goodness*, and many philosophers have not done so.<sup>27</sup>

The only reason to engage with questions of ethics and beauty and politics, according to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, is to try and logically clarify those conversations, which would otherwise be horribly muddled. What of philosophers who are drawn to such questions out of innate interest or who feel emotionally compelled towards them? The entry tells us, “there is no reason why” a philosopher would be interested in something like goodness. So much for Socrates.

We can see the separation of feeling and emotion from thought that Tracy mentions. “There is no reason why” a philosopher should take an interest in beauty or goodness. This implies that we need to be able to give reasons for why we’re interested in what interests us. But imagine having to rationally justify why you like Bach or Coltrane. I’m not denying that there might be reasons, but I do think it is unrealistic to expect us to have rational justifications for everything that we feel compelled to think about.<sup>28</sup>

Ayer hammers home the point that feelings are not suitable justifications: “... sentences which simply express moral judgements do not say anything. They are pure

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<sup>27</sup> *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. My italics.

<sup>28</sup> At the risk of being overly cautious—I am not advocating that we give up trying to justify ourselves to each other. I just want to point out that sometimes it is (pardon the expression) perfectly reasonable for us not to be able to give reasons for things, especially to a question of the sort “*what reason do you have for wanting to philosophize about goodness and beauty?*”

expressions of feeling and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood.”<sup>29</sup> Emotions are severed from truth. How we feel cannot have any relation to what is true on this model of philosophy. The idea of emotions leading us astray from truth predates Ayer by a good deal. Here, for example, is Francis Bacon, writing in the seventeenth century: “Numberless in short are the ways, and sometimes imperceptible, in which the affections colour and infect the understanding.”<sup>30</sup> To say that feelings “infect the understanding” is to treat feelings and emotions as foreign invaders antithetical to understanding, to thinking itself. This is not to say that modern philosophy ignores emotions—the philosophy of emotions is a small but definite subfield in the discipline—but the crucial point is that emotions, when they are examined, are not themselves seen as valuable sources of knowledge or modes of knowing. They are merely objects of analysis.

Another tendency expressed by Descartes that continues to the present day is the association of truth with generality and abstraction. Ayer sees the only acceptable sort of knowledge as propositional claims that can be verified or falsified, propositions that are as far removed from particular details as possible. In the Enlightenment, following Descartes, Denis Diderot remarks in his philosophical encyclopedia that “good sense dictates that, the more abstract a proposition is, the more general it is, the abstraction consisting in extending the range of a truth while eliminating from its enunciation the terms which particularize it.”<sup>31</sup> Here, abstraction and truth are direct correlates. In the cultural

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<sup>29</sup> Ayer 1952, 109.

<sup>30</sup> Bacon 1860 [1620], 58.

<sup>31</sup> Diderot 1751–1780, entry on “art.”

cauldron that was the Scientific Revolution (seventeenth century and earlier), the Enlightenment (eighteenth century), and the Industrial Revolution (nineteenth century), abstraction was crucial in terms of a general method that could be applied to many particulars (e.g. large-scale factory production, equal rights and political tolerance, etc.).<sup>32</sup> Bacon brings out these connections when he says that “the mind itself [must] be from the very outset not left to take its own course, but guided at every step; and the business be done as if by machinery.”<sup>33</sup> A machine is composed of interchangeable parts, which echoes the Cartesian idea that we break down problems and knowledge into their most basic components and reorder them. If one cog in a machine rusts, we replace it with any other that fits.

Bertrand Russell’s attitude towards abstraction and particulars is on full display when he says the following:

The topics we discussed in our first lecture, and the topics we shall discuss later, all reduce themselves, *in so far as they are genuinely philosophical*, to problems of logic. This is not due to any accident, but to the fact that every philosophical problem, when it is *subjected to the necessary analysis and purification*, is found either to be not really philosophical at all, or else to be, in the sense in which we are using the word, logical.<sup>34</sup>

Again, philosophy is identified only with what is logical, “not due to any accident” but because only logical problems are truly philosophical. Russell sees analysis as a sort of purification: wash away all the particulars, the possible exceptions to an abstract logical proposition. Knowledge in this view boils down to what is scientifically verifiable, what is logically provable:

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<sup>32</sup> See Gauthier 1974 and Strayer and Gatzke 1984.

<sup>33</sup> Bacon 1860 [1620], 40.

<sup>34</sup> Russell, 1926 [1914], 42. My italics.

[The logical-analytic method in philosophy]...has gradually, in the course of actual research, increasingly forced itself upon me as something perfectly definite, capable of embodiment in maxims, and adequate, in all branches on philosophy, to yield whatever *objective scientific knowledge* it is possible to obtain... [*The goal of philosophy is to become a science, and to aim at results independent of the tastes and temperament of the philosopher who advocates them.*]<sup>35</sup>

Philosophy as handmaid to science, used for finding “objective scientific knowledge.”

Russell also introduces the idea that in philosophy, knowledge and truth are totally “independent” of the philosopher, as if personal biography or motive have nothing to do with it.

Given all these examples and historical trajectories, I offer the following summary list characterizing modern professional philosophy: an appeal to science as the ultimate model of knowledge; an emphasis on language (propositions) and logic so strong that anything else is dismissed as a possible source of meaning; a focus on analysis as the ultimate tool for both understanding and writing; dismissal of emotions as possible sources of knowledge; a tendency to link greater abstraction with greater truth; an attempt to remove the personal details and motives of the philosopher herself, which manifests professionally with an inattention to the history of philosophy.

Analytic thought is calculative and piecemeal—something is thought to be understood when it has been broken down into its constitutive elements, elements that can be manipulated and examined from all sides. The etymology is instructive on this point: “analysis” comes from the Ancient Greek *analysis* (“separation of a whole into its component parts, loosening, releasing”), which in turn comes from *analuein* (“to unloose, to release, to set free”). *Analuein* derives from *ana* (“up, on, throughout”) and *luein*

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<sup>35</sup> Russell 1926 [1914], 42–43. My italics.

(“unfasten, loosen, slacken”), the latter of which comes from *luis* (“release, dissolution, untying, dissolving”). *Luis*, in turn, gives us *lutron* (“ransom”), which is cognate with Old Irish’s *lunāti* (“cuts, cuts off”), Latin’s *luere* (“loosen, release, atone for, expiate”), and Old English’s *for-lēosan* (“to lose, to destroy, to perish, to be lost”).<sup>36</sup> Analysis is disintegrative, breaking things down into their component parts to understand them.<sup>37</sup> But things cannot be broken apart randomly—analysis must proceed according to logic. Good analysis goes from premise to premise to conclusion in an ordered sequence. The fundamental rule of analytic thought is the principle of non-contradiction, which states that *X* and *-X* cannot both be true at the same time. (Poetic philosophy, as we shall soon see, does not obey this principle.)

## §5, Gestalt Thought

If modern professional philosophy is an example of analytic thought, then poetic philosophy is an example of gestalt thought. Because it is fundamental to the rest of the dissertation, I will take some time and explain gestalt theory. Afterwards, I will be in a position to explain poetic philosophy in more detail and in more productive contrast to analytic thought. Gestalt thought is a major mode of human cognition that for various reasons is systematically neglected and devalued in our modern society. Just as modern

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<sup>36</sup> Klein 1966, s.v. All etymologies are from Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (1966).

<sup>37</sup> As the opposite of analysis, synthesis operates on the same model. They are different only in their directionality: analysis is subtractive and synthesis is additive.

professional philosophy has benefitted from the cultural ascendancy of analytic thought, poetic philosophy is disadvantaged by the cultural neglect of gestalt thought.<sup>38</sup>

What is gestalt thinking? “Gestalt” means “shape” or “form.” It is a branch of German psychology and philosophy developed by Christian von Ehrenfels in 1890. He was interested in melody and how humans recognize it. For example, *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* is instantly recognizable by most of us, even if we change the words (*Baa Baa Black Sheep* or *A, B, C, D...*) or the key or tempo or anything else. Very few of us could specify the frequency of the specific notes, but the melodic shape is hard to miss. Von Ehrenfels argued that this proves that we do not perceive melodies in a piecemeal way, by perceiving one note and another note and then compiling them into something. What we *do* perceive and know is the melody as a whole, its shape. This shape is a gestalt.

The following generation of gestalt theorists—Max Wertheimer most prominent among them—furthered gestalt research and wrote about its philosophical implications.

Zwicky gives a good summation:

Gestalt comprehension is insight into how things hang together. It is perception *that* a thing or situation hangs together; and it is sensitivity to structural echoes between that thing or situation and others... A gestalt, [these researchers] argued, is *different* from the sum of its parts.<sup>39</sup>

A gestalt is not just the sum of its parts. To perceive a gestalt is not to perceive *X*, *Y*, and *Z* and then add them together in aggregative fashion. Seeing the structure of a thing is what matters. Here is Wertheimer in his own words:

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<sup>38</sup> I follow the stimulating work of Zwicky 2019. Her overall argument takes a more historical breadth and branches out into ecological and socio-political implications that are beyond my scope here. I try to draw on her core arguments and repurpose them for my own uses.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.



There are contexts in which what happens in the whole is not derived from how the individual pieces are put together, but where, on the contrary—this is the heart of the matter—what happens in a part is determined by inner structural laws of that whole.<sup>40</sup>

The key point here is that, very often, we perceive wholes before parts *because the whole is what's actually there*. What we call the elements or constitutive parts of a thing are actually not elementary at all but are the end product of analysis. Analytic thought's *modus operandi* of analysis gets things backwards. Wertheimer's son, Max, phrases it this way: "parts do not become parts, do not function as parts, until there is a whole of which they are parts."<sup>41</sup>

To become aware of a gestalt is to become aware of how things hang together, how they cohere. A thing is coherent if it is integrated, if the parts and the whole are necessarily mutually constitutive. Imagine a sphere, and every point on the sphere's surface has a thread connecting that point to every other point in the sphere. Striking any one point sends reverberations throughout the whole sphere *and* through to every other point. We cannot alter one point without altering the sphere. In fact, if we were to remove one point entirely (say, with analytic dissection), we would no longer have a sphere at all. To understand this integration is to grasp the gestalt.

Two caveats here: (1) gestalt theory does not claim that every whole is coherently integrated. Sometimes a whole is just a bag of pebbles or pile of twigs—a mere aggregate. (2) Gestalt theory does not claim that the parts just appear whenever there is a whole. Parts have their own distinct existence. Once our attention is drawn to a part, we can try

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<sup>40</sup> Wertheimer 1925, 43.

<sup>41</sup> Wertheimer 1980, 213.

to isolate it and even extract it from its context (this is where the powers of analysis come in). If you want to understand something about how a shaft of hair works, plucking it from a head and placing it under a microscope is a fine idea. But you will not have a fully meaningful understanding of hair until you see the hair on a head in context—that is, the whole tells us something meaningful about the part.

Wertheimer gives the example of a symphony. We could ask, “*Why did the viola just emit an F-natural?*” and we could answer by saying “*Because its C-string was pressed down at the 4:3 ratio*” or by saying “*Because the cellos played a B-flat.*” Both these answers are deeply unsatisfying though, and the best answer might be “*Because that’s just how Beethoven’s Third Symphony goes.*” The part (in this case the particular notes played by individual musicians) is made meaningful by the whole, not the other way around. Zwicky compares this to Aristotle, who would claim that we cannot have an explanation of a thing until we grasp its formal cause.<sup>42</sup>

Aristotle’s four causes (αἰτίαι) are tricky to explain, but the comparison to gestalt perceptions is a good one. Wertheimer is not saying that the symphony itself would exist without some violists playing *F*s while some cellists play *B-flat*. Similarly, Aristotle is not trying to deny the existence of effective causes (how a thing comes to be what it is—e.g., the effective cause of a sculpture is the sculptor). The effective cause of the symphony is the collective physical movements of the musicians and their instruments at certain times. But what Aristotle and Wertheimer *are* saying is that, most of the time, even an exhaustive list of effective causes will not give you any meaningful insight into what’s going on.

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<sup>42</sup> Zwicky 2019, 6.

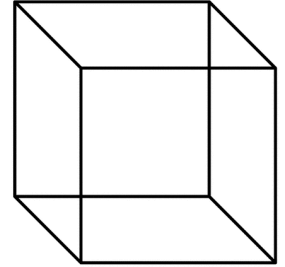
Reading a long and detailed list of which musicians are doing what when is something very different from just hearing a Beethoven symphony.

Here are some examples of gestalt perceptions: recognizing a melody, understanding how the seemingly nonsense lines of a poem actually make sense; looking at a mathematical proof, especially a visual one, and suddenly “getting it;” reading the subtle signs at an office party and realizing that two coworkers are having an affair; recognizing the face of a friend in the grocery checkout line after not seeing them for years; playing in a musical group and improvising off each other, “being in the groove” as jazz musicians call it; picking up on a mood or “vibe” at a family dinner; a profound sense of one-ness or insight. We do *not* think like this: “*That Roman nose...that curly hair, the color of steel...green eyes...Logically that must be Aidan!*” We *do* think like this: “*Oh! Aidan! My how he has aged...his hair...*” This is not to say that perception of elements doesn't ever happen. It does. Gestalt theory just holds that it is not the foundation of our experience of the world.

There are two types of gestalt shifts. First, we move from apparent chaos—a tangle of ideas, data, sounds, lines, features—to perceiving an ordered or patterned structure. A common example of this might be finally seeing the hidden image in a magic eye picture. Or take a scroll of Chinese calligraphy: what at first seems an impenetrable jumble of brushstrokes suddenly clarifies once we figure out one or two characters and are able to recognize the poem that we're looking at. A second kind of gestalt shift is when we come to see one thing as another thing, or phrased differently, our perceptual experience get restructured. An example of this is the Necker cube, which we see either as an upward-facing or a downward-facing cube. The first time we glimpse it, we see one of

these cubes, and we usually have to be prompted to try and see it any other way, after which we can switch between the two at will.

The Necker cube is an especially good example of a gestalt shift because it shows some differences between gestalt and analytic thought. It makes no sense to ask which of the two cubes is more fundamental, which one is the “real” cube. Nor does it make sense to say that what



we have here is just a random array of lines that we may freely interpret however we like—as a sphere or an elephant. In fact, in shifting from one cube to the other, our experience is *not* interpretive. It is *directly perceptive*. We see one shape and then another. This differs from a logical argument where we accept a conclusion in direct proportion to how well we follow someone’s sequential reasoning. There is no way to *persuade* someone seeing a sphere that he is not really seeing a sphere. All we can do is *gesture* to the cube again: “*try to look at it this way...*”

What this means is that gestalt perceptions are not calculable or logical. There is no recipe for arriving at a gestalt insight—you either see it or you don’t. Gestalts usually coalesce suddenly, in a flash of insight, and are not the result of a process extending through time.<sup>43</sup> There is no method to help someone recognize a musical motif being sampled in another song. All we can do is replay it for them and keep pointing to it. Once a gestalt is grasped, however, it is difficult to stop seeing it—the Necker cube refuses to sit still.

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<sup>43</sup> Zwicky 2019, 17.

Gestalts are incorrigible—they seem right: “*I was so sure they were sleeping together!*” It is relatively easy to dissuade someone away from the conclusion of analytic thought by offering another, contrastive analysis. In fact, we very often don’t trust *our own* logical arguments or arithmetic calculations and submit them to criticisms from others in a way we do not with our intuitions and flashes of insight. Here is just one instance from a wealth of historical and experimental examples. Gestalt theorist Konrad Lorenz talks about the “fundamental incorrigibility” of gestalt perception in an experiment by Alexander Bavelas. Bavelas asked engineers to find the organizing principle (the gestalt) behind what was actually a random group of stimuli. The engineers discerned all sorts of organizing patterns and had trouble believing that there wasn’t one.<sup>44</sup>

“*So does this mean that gestalt perception cannot be trusted?*” Yes, but it is no less trustworthy than any other sort of perception or thinking. Analytic thought often forgets its own contingency. Consider the following description of logic from Willard Van Orman Quine’s *Philosophy of Logic*: “logic is the systematic study of the logical truths. Pressed further, I would say that a sentence is logically true if all sentences with its grammatical structure are true. Pressed further still, I would say to read this book.”<sup>45</sup> Quine’s attempt to ground logic is circular, and in the end, all he can do is gesture to his book, which will either satisfy or not. Susan Haack, in her *Philosophy of Logics*, writes something similar: “because I have to begin somewhere, I shall take for granted an intuitive idea of what it is

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<sup>44</sup> As seen in Zwicky 2019, 83.

<sup>45</sup> Quine 1970, xi.

to be a formal system.”<sup>46</sup> I am not trying to disparage logical thought. I *am* trying to show that analytic thinking and modern philosophy often dismiss or ignore gestalt insight for unfair reasons. As Zwicky phrases it:

...the idea of logical thinking is an impression of a thing, a something, a ‘that,’ which is gathered from a number of instances, which can be only imperfectly codified, and which is rooted in, bound up with, many other human activities, practices, and concerns in a way that makes explicit, non-circular definition impossible.<sup>47</sup>

Logical thinking itself is, then, a kind of gestalt. So the fact that gestalt insight cannot be trusted is the same as saying that logical conclusions cannot always be trusted. It doesn’t at all mean that we should abandon either one.

Conditioned as we are by the Enlightenment and Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, our North American-Western European-modern Industrial culture tends to associate intelligence only with analytic thinking, with mechanized and algorithmic logical processes that aim at objective verification. Gestalt thought is antithetical to this. As Zwicky says, “if you don’t get it, the best you can do is ask someone to trace the outlines again—and hope.”<sup>48</sup> Again, as in the case of the Necker cube, the fact that someone may not perceive the upward-facing cube doesn’t mean it isn’t there—there’s just no formula for seeing it. Gestalt perception *by definition* is not piecemeal and so is not programmable, not reducible to atomized steps.

This is not just theoretical speculation. Recent scientific research confirms that the mind does seem to have two distinct types of thinking that we might label as gestalt and

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<sup>46</sup> Haack 1978, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Zwicky 2019, 1–2.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

analytic.<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Schooler, a psychologist, has amassed compelling evidence that suggests we cannot talk about gestalt perception “because the cognitive capacities involved in analysis and verbal description actually interfere with the cognitive capacities involved in shape-recognition and insight.”<sup>50</sup> Schooler and his associates refer to this as “verbal overshadowing” and even suggest that it may be responsible for much of what we would call a feeling of ineffability. The inability to put into language certain experiences, their research suggests, stems from the fact that our brains have two quite distinct modes of thought, and that the one involved with language actively causes the other one to fail. “To attempt to articulate the thought processes involved is to undermine them. Or: we can try to talk, but we won’t do a very good job, either of talking of gestalting.”<sup>51</sup>

Zwicky points to the work of neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist, whose work on the brain goes some distance in explaining the phenomenon. Very generally, McGilchrist marshals heaps of evidence to show that the two hemispheres of the brain function generally in two quite different ways, and that these two types of cognition arose from natural selection—that is, they both helped humans (and other animals) survive.<sup>52</sup> The left

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<sup>49</sup> The following two pages are a brief foray into neuroscience. Obviously it is well beyond my ken to get into this topic in any depth, but I do think that a quick two pages of basic information will reinforce my points about gestalt theory and its role in poetic philosophy. Mainly, I want to show that the claims I’ve made about the incompatibility between analysis and language versus poetic philosophy have some good grounding.

<sup>50</sup> Zwicky 2019, 19. Schooler 2014, Schooler and Engstler-Schooler 1990, and Schooler and Melcher 1995 among others.

<sup>51</sup> Zwicky 2019, 19.

<sup>52</sup> McGilchrist is quick to point out that he is not arguing for simplistic “right brained” or “left brained” personality-type schema. The functions of the hemispheres are not completely lateralized—both hemispheres participate in most functions. The thrust of his work is to show that the two hemispheres *do* engage the world in distinct ways.

hemisphere, McGilchrist says, pays “narrowly focussed, sharply defined attention” to the environment, to details, *in order to* manipulate things—pick up something, eat something, run away from something.<sup>53</sup> He goes on: “Its aim is to close down to a certainty and it deals poorly with ambiguity... [E]lements are decontextualized, seen as more or less interchangeable category members rather than as individuals... There is an excess of confidence and a lack of insight...”<sup>54</sup> The left hemisphere is the source of what I am calling analytic thought, and two further points are important here. First, the left hemisphere is the site of what neuroscientists call the default mode network, a nexus in the brain that blocks free associative activity. When the default mode network itself is dampened, subjects experience a loss of sense of self or ego.<sup>55</sup> Second, the left hemisphere is overwhelmingly connected to language use.<sup>56</sup> This reinforces the point that analytic thought and language are twinned, and that both are separate from gestalt perception of wholes.

The right hemisphere, McGilchrist tells us, pays more attention to relationships and connections, to patterns and contexts. Think of a gazelle drinking at the riverbank and suddenly feeling the presence of a predator. There is nothing specific to trigger this instinct, just a general feeling of unease, a faint perception that the regular pattern of

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<sup>53</sup> McGilchrist 2016, II.I.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Goldberg et al. 2006, Griffiths et al. 2006, Carhart-Harris et al. 2008, Carhart-Harris and Friston 2010, and Tagliazucchi et al. 2016. And see Pollan 2015 for a good summary. Interestingly, many of these studies explicitly position themselves as lending experimental evidence to concepts originally theorized by Freud. This matters because the single biggest dismissal of Freud is usually that his psychical structures have no corresponding reality in the physical brain.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.



things is *off*. McGilchrist writes: “I may feel myself to be part of something much bigger than myself, and even existing in and thorough that ‘something’...”<sup>57</sup> He goes on: “[T]he link between the right hemisphere and holistic or *Gestalt* perception is one of the most reliable and durable of the generalizations about hemispheric differences.” And: “The right hemisphere sees the whole, before whatever it is gets broken up into parts in our attempt to ‘know’ it...The right hemisphere, with its greater *integrative* power, is constantly searching for patterns in things...”<sup>58</sup>

So, to sum up, evidence supports that our brains have at least two general modes of cognition. Analytic thought aims at isolating and manipulating individual entities in the world, the same sort of thinking used in logic and mechanical understandings. Gestalt thought aims at perceiving wholes and patterns. Analytic thought also connects with the sense of self or ego and with language use. Language use actively inhibits gestalt perception, thus giving scientific credibility to the phenomenon of ineffability. We also have an explanation for why the brain so naturally tries to see underlying patterns and organization behind events (I will discuss this point with Murdoch in Chapter Three), and also why gestalts just feel satisfying. It is similar to Aristotle’s point the *Poetics* that learning through imitation is just pleasurable.<sup>59</sup> It feels *good* to get it right, and gestalt insights often *are* right. One possibility may be that analytic thinking evolved as a check on gestalt thinking, as a verifiable process to encourage a “look before you leap” behavior.

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<sup>57</sup> McGilchrist 2009, 25. Zwicky takes this and uses it to argue for a convincing ecological awareness, a sort of environmental ethics.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 46–47.

<sup>59</sup> *Poetics* §4, 1448b.

*“So if gestalt comprehension defies analysis and even language, how can we get better at it? Are some of us just doomed to be bad at it?”* As with logical and analytic thought, some people are for whatever reason naturally more talented at gestalt perception. But for the rest of us, there is practice. Try getting an elite ballplayer to tell you, in a series of verifiable steps, how to be good at baseball. A tip here or there might come in handy, but in the end you just have to play a lot of baseball. No veteran poet can give an aspiring amateur a checklist of “how to write great poems.” The best way to become a sculptor is to find a master sculptor and practice and watch. Because this advice is resistant to analysis and language, it is also resistant to mechanization and programming—two things our modern society holds in high regard—and thus gets ignored. But this means our culture and modern professional philosophy actually ignore a major source of human experience and insight. Zwicky mentions a 1916 conversation between Wertheimer and Albert Einstein in which the psychologist asks the physicist about his thought process as he developed the Theory of Relativity. Einstein says, “these thoughts did not come in any verbal formation. I very rarely think in words at all. A thought comes, and I may try to express it in words afterward.” Wertheimer pushed back and asked about all the people who claim to think in words. Einstein just laughed.<sup>60</sup>

The way we talk about insight often involves the vocabulary of recognition. Gestalt perception involves a shift of perspective, sometimes brought about by our noticing some heretofore unseen detail. This does not mean that we perceive the part first. Rather, in a gestalt, the parts and the whole are integrated. We do not notice a list of

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<sup>60</sup> As found in Zwicky 2019, 18.

individual parts and then mechanically combine them to arrive at a conclusion.<sup>61</sup> One part gestures to the whole the way a good critic gestures at the whole meaning of a poem by pointing out details. And here we come to a key point: perceiving a gestalt *is* the experience of meaning. What does it mean to mean? To grasp a gestalt, to see the shape of something, to see coherence. You cannot give an argument to make something meaningful to someone, nor can you write an algorithm that will reliably output meaning. What does it mean to mean? To grasp a gestalt. And what is a gestalt? A shape or form.

### **§6, In Freudian Terms**

Sigmund Freud, himself a neuroscientist, also argued that there exist two distinct modes of human cognition: primary and secondary process. These two modes map neatly onto the distinction between gestalt and analytic thought respectively. Without going too far off course, I want to mention Freud's schema here because it is a sort of case study for the difference between poetic and modern professional philosophy that I am sketching. Our society is dominated by analytic thought, and neoliberal capitalism constantly reinforces mechanistic, algorithmic, calculative reason. Gestalt theory was eclipsed by cognitive behavioral therapy in North America and never again rose to prominence.<sup>62</sup> Wholistic, intuitive ways of thinking and valuing are largely dismissed not just by professional philosophy but by our entire socio-economic system, shaped as it is in analytic thought. Freud is instructive because he tried in his writings to reconcile primary

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<sup>61</sup> Synthesis is just analysis in reverse.

<sup>62</sup> Zwicky 2019 shows the ramifications of this eclipse for ecological disaster and cultural impoverishment. Any socio-historical critique of mechanistic capitalism and algorithmic views of intelligence is beyond my scope here, but any astute student of politics and cultural criticism can probably think of plenty of articles, essays, and books that reveal this state of affairs.

and secondary processes, these two opposite ways of thinking. But in his reconciliation, Freud actually ends up privileging secondary process (analytic thought). By examining how Freud sees these two ways of thinking and how he wants to translate one into the other, I can clarify further the differences between gestalt and analytic thought, which will in turn highlight more of poetic philosophy's unique features in the next section.

Freud's ideas on primary and secondary process thought take shape in writings throughout his career.<sup>63</sup> Primary process is what he calls unrestricted psychic activity characteristic of dreams. It is associative and imagistic, downplaying causal logical connections in favor of metaphorical and gestural ones. Primary process thought is characterized by an emphasis on inner mental activity over external reality; a sense of timelessness; acceptance of contradiction and paradox; malleable and unclear boundaries between one's sense of self and the world or other people. Primary process also exerts intense power over our somatic processes that we are not consciously aware of.<sup>64</sup> Almost all of these features match up with gestalt thought as described by theorists like Wertheimer and recent researchers like McGilchrist.

Secondary process thought inhibits primary process—this is its entire purpose, and why Freud terms it “secondary.” It aims at manipulating the world and satisfying the ego. Freud nowhere describes secondary process in a neat list, but it is basically the

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<sup>63</sup> Key texts in the theory of mind I am outlining are Freud 1895, 1900, 1911, 1915, 1920, and 1923. Specific quotations and more exact references are provided where possible, but without turning this chapter into an in-depth study of Freudian metapsychology, I try as much as possible to paraphrase in articulating a focused model out of what, in Freud's writings, are much more scattered ideas.

<sup>64</sup> Freud 1905, 316–318. For the list of general characteristics, see the important essay titled “The Unconscious” (Freud 1917, 187ff). This last point about exerting power over somatic processes should be obvious to anyone who has experienced their mental anxiety convert, inexplicably and unpredictably, into physical symptoms.

opposite of primary process.<sup>65</sup> Secondary process thinking exhibits a strong separation between the self and non-self; sharp distinctions between inner, mental experience and the external world; strict adherence to linear time and space; proceeds according to causal logic, especially the principle of non-contradiction. The standard tool of secondary process thought is language. Again, there is an obvious overlap with the left-hemispheric activity identified by McGilchrist and Freud's secondary process, including the way this analytic thought is bound up with sense of self and language-use.

Freud hypothesizes something quite similar to McGilchrist and others' research findings. He proposes that secondary process developed as a check on primary process thought. It inhibits the freely associative activity of primary process *in order to* help us survive. He calls this development the "reality principle," the idea that as biological organisms, we cannot just *imagine* that our basic needs are satisfied—we must actually satisfy them or die.<sup>66</sup> Such activity requires interaction with the external world, manipulation of tools, correct judgments about self and non-self: "*this is too hot, that cave is dangerous, this person is not me*" and so on. Organisms must draw distinctions in space and time, sort out and classify sensory input data. The apotheosis of all these tasks is language. Freud's secondary process, just like analytic thought, understands language as necessarily implicated in the activity of the self or ego, as necessarily manipulative of the world, and as inherently analytic and systematic.

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<sup>65</sup> The following characteristics of secondary process are thus assembled from a variety of works. For the major sources, see Freud 1895, Part I, §1, 14–18 and Part III; Freud 1900, Vol. 5, Ch. VIII, §E and F; Freud 1911, 218–226; Freud 1915, §VII, 196–204 and 209–215; Freud 1920, §IV and §V; Freud 1923, 19–27.

<sup>66</sup> Freud 1911, 219.

Now I want to highlight a problem with Freud's model that will illuminate the problems with modern professional philosophy versus poetic philosophy. The basic problem is this: Freud says that primary process thought is unconscious and secondary process thought is conscious.<sup>67</sup> He theorized this whole model partly to account for dreams. Freud wanted to understand how dreams seem meaningful to us despite being a sort of nonsense. He famously viewed dreams as our desires acted out in the safe and illusory world of unconsciousness.<sup>68</sup> Dreams are a relief valve where our energies can let off steam without threatening the social order. Primary process is characterized as dreamlike thought, and dreams are unconscious, ergo primary process thought is largely relegated to unconsciousness, we are unaware of it.

The obvious problem is that dreams *do* sometimes drift over into conscious thought, we *do* remember our dreams when we wake up. Freud himself describes slips of the tongue and jokes as primary process, both of which are obviously conscious activities.<sup>69</sup> Or think of artists, who often exhibit dreamlike thinking while they work, losing track of their "impermeable ego boundaries," as one commentator on Freud puts it.<sup>70</sup> Artists of all sorts regularly deploy paradox and contradiction, associative and gestural meaning, and they describe experiences of timelessness during performances. Literature from various mystical traditions around the world reveals experience of

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<sup>67</sup> Freud 1915, 202–203, among other places.

<sup>68</sup> Freud 1900.

<sup>69</sup> For jokes, see Freud 1915, 186, and for slips of the tongue, Freud 1900, vol. 5, 596.

<sup>70</sup> Rycroft 1975, 29.

oneness, connectedness between all things that defies logical articulation but is definitely a conscious event (the mystics are able to write about it, after all).<sup>71</sup>

The key text for Freud's work on dreams is *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where he tries to figure out how dreams can influence us and be meaningless all at once. Because dreams do not follow the logical linguistic structures of secondary process, they require interpretation, which Freud defines as follows: "... 'interpreting' a dream implies assigning a 'meaning' to it—that is, replacing it by something which fits into the chain of our mental acts as a link having a validity and importance equal to the rest."<sup>72</sup> Interpreting a dream involves *assigning* meaning to it rather than *finding* meaning in it. Freud is upfront about "replacing [the meaning of a dream] by something" else. What is this something else? Language. Freud's own therapeutic practice ("the talking cure") attests to this. Interpreting dreams means giving an explanation in language of a dream arranged so as to "make sense." In other words, untangle and undo the associations, ambiguities, and contradictions. Dream interpretation is the restructuring and elaborating in secondary process of something originally experienced in primary process. (Note the echo of Descartes' method here: a restructuring from without in an attempt to impose meaning.)

The goal of interpretation, for Freud, is to comprehend material originally encountered "in a manner which is in the highest degree bewildering and irrational."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Traditions of mysticism are a varied and subtle as are the religions of the world, but consider just as three examples Simone Weil, medieval Tang Daoists, and the Hellenistic Plotinus. All describe experiences of oneness with the larger world that defies explicit articulation and logic but nevertheless takes place in the conscious mind. For an overview of mysticism in the Chinese Daoist tradition, see Kohn 1992.

<sup>72</sup> Freud 1900, 96.

<sup>73</sup> Freud 1900, 597.

An obvious analogy for this is the translation between languages. We rely on interpretation to render a foreign language intelligible to us. Translation helps us make sense of something that seems nonsensical. This is, at root, the entire project of Freud's psychoanalysis, to take the unintelligibility of primary process and translate it, through "the talking cure," into intelligible secondary process where it can be *analyzed* and dealt with. In the analogy, the unconscious is an unintelligible foreign language, but this analogy shows Freud's problem in saying that primary process is meaningless: a foreign language is *not* meaningless at all, no matter how unintelligible it may be to those of us untrained in it. This suggests that the unconscious dream is also not meaningless, however unintelligible it may seem. In fact, the problem may lie with *us* and our inability to perceive the meaning. Analytic thought and secondary process are more egocentric, they want to *make* meaning by imposing systematic order. Gestalt thought and primary process recognize that there is already meaning to be grasped if we can just see it. So unconscious/primary process thought, like a foreign language, is not actually meaningless—this translation analogy raises two points.

First, there is the question of how content relates to form. Translating a thought from primary into secondary process changes the structure or form of the thought. We must take what is not organized according to linear time and make it linear, we must take what is associative and make it causal, and so on. How, then, can we be so sure that the translated thought is the same as the original? When we alter the "grammar" of a thought, do we not lose the thought? Consider the translation of poetry. A good poem depends on every single detail to make meaning, from its sounds, arrangement on the



page, rhymes and rhythms, dialectic and idiolect, and so on. In Zwicky's words, "the meaning of a good poem is reflected in a complex lingua-chemical equilibrium; to translate it is to change its state."<sup>74</sup> Translations of poems do exist, and many are good, but nobody would seriously say that given the option and ability it would not be better to read a poem in the original. Even with subtle cribs and notes, the poem itself is changed. Similarly, primary process thoughts can be interpreted into secondary—we do it all the time, and sometimes we do it subtly and attentively, but we still unavoidably lose things in the conversion.<sup>75</sup>

What sorts of things we lose depends on what sorts of things we recognize as meaningful. The loss of something meaningless is hardly a loss at all: if you think rhythm unimportant to poetry, then turning a Homeric line into English prose makes no difference. Even an excellent translation will lose the precise sonorous effects of the original, and in the case of poetry, the way a poem sounds *is* significant—the rhymes and other aural effects *matter*, they were chosen on purpose and have *meaning*. Analogously, when translating from primary to secondary process, there is the potential for indifference to those elements of primary process that *mean*. When we translate from one thing to another, we unavoidably make judgements about what sorts of things matter to us.

The second problem arising from the translation analogy is that translation happens between two languages, but primary process is defined partly by the fact that it is

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<sup>74</sup> Zwicky 2015, 92.

<sup>75</sup> In gestalt terms, all we can do is gesture, try to *show* rather than *tell*. We do try to describe our gestalt insights in language all the time—that is, translate them. There is probably something unavoidably human to this translation. But we're kidding ourselves if we think the translation into analytic thought is the same as the gestalt insight itself.

*not* structured as a language. Primary process does not operate along the logical and systematic rules that make language the centerpiece of secondary process thought. Because secondary process does operate linguistically, it struggles with the non-linguistic, extra-logical nature of primary process. So does the translation analogy really apply at all? Yes, if we understand translation in a metaphorical sense, as the attempt “to interpret, explain; to expound the significance of... to express [something] in terms of another.”<sup>76</sup> Indeed, *metaphorical* interpretation is all there is when it comes to primary and secondary processes. Metaphors need not follow a systematic logic or be argumentatively sound in order to be meaningful. A logical argument and a metaphor can both persuade us or shift our viewpoint or strike us as meaningful, even if in quite different ways (I discuss metaphors at length in Chapter Three). Primary process does not need to be made sense of because it already makes sense, just not in the way secondary process makes sense.

Freud’s point that we think in two different modes holds, but nothing in his own schema requires that one mode be more or less meaningful than the other. They are different, and that is the point. If we understand translation in its metaphorical sense, we are again working with gestalt insights. I said above that one type of gestalt shift is seeing one thing in terms of another, which is just the sense of translation we’re dealing with here. “Translating” from primary into secondary process, then, is basically like trying to initiate a gestalt shift. What might this look like in practice?

I think it would be like interpreting a poem. We may know the language of a poem, still struggle to make sense of it, and so turn to a critic for help. When we turn to a

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<sup>76</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v.

critic, however, we are not seeking a prosaic and tedious rendering of the poem in prose or an “answer key” that tells us what  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  all mean. Good criticism will *gesture* to some feature. “*See how, even though the subject matter is dark and jarring, the line sounds fluid and light because of the repeated vowels?*” Or, “*notice the motif of moisture and dampness here, here, and here?*” Good criticism, as Susan Sontag remarks in *Against Interpretation*, should help us “to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more,” helps us experience “the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are.”<sup>77</sup> Interpretation need not structurally alter the poem or thought but rather help us “*see* more.” In other words, *we* are the ones who need altering. Meaning is there, we just need to see it. We are the ones who need our perspective nudged, who need an unseen facet highlighted so that it may flash and shine on the whole, allowing us to grasp its shape. Similarly, the *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi* have meaning, and our goal should be to grasp it, not to ransack it to support this or that theory or doctrine, not to package it in wrapping acceptable to modern professional philosophy.

### **§7, Poetic Philosophy**

Poetic philosophy is an attempt to do philosophy in a way that draws on gestalt thought as well as analytic thought. Poetic philosophy is thus largely concerned with perception of integrated forms (i.e., *gestalts*). If the *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi* are integrated forms, then poetic philosophy is a more sensitive standpoint from which to read them. I return to the *Phaedrus* and *Zhuangzi* later. For now, let me build on the general remarks about gestalt thinking to explain poetic philosophy.

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<sup>77</sup> Sontag 1964, §9. Her italics.

Philosophy is thinking in love with clarity. I borrow this beautiful definition from Zwicky for my own ends. The line itself is rhythmically stressed, hinting at the importance of form: *philosophy* / is *thinking* / in *love* / with *clarity*. The importance of love cannot be overstated. Love is an emotion, a bodily experience as much as an idea, a thing we sometimes intuit, a thing we cannot prove but can still know, notoriously resistant to logical analysis. This definition thus draws our attention to the importance of all those things modern philosophy typically leaves out. Love of clarity is an *eros* for clarity, a desire for clarity. So what is clarity?

Although seldom mentioned, the idea of clarity in argument is a metaphor. When we say that a position or train of thought is clear, we are speaking figuratively. Modern professional philosophy understands clarity as logical precision. This is why someone like Ayer believes that “no act of intuition can be said to reveal a truth about any matter of fact unless it issues in verifiable propositions.”<sup>78</sup> Intuition is too fuzzy or soft or imprecise and thus too unclear. But why should a thought that is intuitive, emotional, or passionate not also be clear? If we want to define clarity by excluding these things, well enough, but that would be circular. What would it mean for a poem or a piece of music to be clear? Must we be logically analytical in order to be clear? Poetic philosophy says “no.”

Modern professional philosophy upholds analysis as its weapon of choice because breaking things into small elements to be discreetly manipulated is how we clarify concepts. Logical precision is clarity. Logic is a system of abstract rules that apply to all

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<sup>78</sup> Ayer 1952, 120.

situations, variables replaced at will, unique circumstances and particulars ignored.<sup>79</sup> This has to do with ideas exemplified in the above quotations: mechanistic thinking, separation of feeling from thought, equating abstraction and truth, and so on. Philosophy aims at clarity (i.e., logical precision), and so proceeds by analysis, but this means philosophy chooses analysis as a mode based on a preconceived notion of clarity as logical precision—this is circular.

The etymology of “clarity” can help us think of it differently. “Clear” comes from a proto-Indo-European root, *\*kla* or *\*kal*, meaning “to shout” or “resound.” Clarity is originally an aural experience of sound, a reverberating force that strikes us. This root shifted from aural to visual in the Latin *clarus*, which does not mean “transparent” like we might think but rather “shining, radiant, glorious,” all of which are visual analogues of aural resonance.<sup>80</sup> Synonyms of “clear” include the following: transparent, unclouded, lustrous, unambiguous, intelligible, manifest, discerning, penetrating, complete, open, unobstructed. Some of these words could describe a novel (“a *discerning* depiction of character”) or song (“an *intelligible* rhythm”) as well as an analytic argument.

So, something is clear if it is transparent, if it illuminates whatever sits in the dark, if it reverberates like a bell, if it makes something manifest to us. We say that we see a person clearly when we grasp their motives, their frailties, their dignity. We say that we clearly understand a situation when we know (and we “*just know*” without logical analysis)

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<sup>79</sup> I am being merely descriptive here. Logic can be a wonderful thing, and in order for it to work, particulars *need* to be ignored. I am not trying to blame logic so much as professional philosophy’s myopic obsession with logic.

<sup>80</sup> Klein 1966, s.v.

how the various players will react. We “see” the beauty of Beethoven’s late String Quartet No.14 (Op.131) once we can finally feel the rhythm or predict the course of the music despite its infamous lack of a strong melodic line. Modern philosophy adheres to clarity-as-analysis at the expense of all these meanings, at the expense of a clarity that recognizes depth, tone, resonance, reflection, elegance, or raw emotional *oomph*. In the language of gestalt: we grasp an integrated whole when it is clear, and clarity is the experience of perceiving a whole, an experience that feels meaningful.

Of course, this model of clarity makes clarity difficult to measure (as all gestalt insights are). In modern professional philosophy, clarity is a relatively straightforward matter of analytic precision. The logic of an argument is its own proof of clarity. But a piece of music may *clearly* have funk, as jazz musicians say, and yet that funk is totally resistant to analysis. “*Play on the back end of the note, try to bend each note, hit the down beat.*” All well and good, but anyone following that recipe is not at all guaranteed to play funky—and yet the song is funky, that much is reverberatingly *clear*. But this expanded understanding of clarity does not leave us without any verification. In Zwicky’s words:

Proof that you’ve understood such expressions is not that you can translate them [into analytic discourse], but that you are left breathless with the shock of meaning—with the recognition that you’ve been addressed, or with the sense of “several things dovetailed in [the] mind,” as Keats would say.<sup>81</sup>

We know we’ve grasped the significance of an experience because we can feel it in our bones, we have an “*ahh!*” moment, the details of which may differ for each individual. If this sounds like a dodge, that is perhaps because philosophy is so in thrall to this

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<sup>81</sup> Zwicky 205, 97.

systematic, mechanistic mindset that we unquestioningly believe clarity is something that *can* be measured.

Something is clear if it resonates. When we see or feel resonance, what we are doing is intuiting that a work's meaning comes from and is embodied in its form or structure. When we hear ringing, we know those reverberations come from a bell somewhere. In lamenting the separation of form and content, Tracy says that form is disclosive of reality. This is a fairly straightforward point in light of gestalt theory. Forms exist—e.g., the melodic line is there whether we can identify it or not. When we perceive a form, if that form is integrated and clear, it strikes us. This is the experience of meaning. Thus, meaning requires the existence of form. Simply put, if a thing is meaningful that thing has a form (it is, after all, a *thing*).<sup>82</sup>

Analysis is *disintegrative* in that it loosens and breaks down wholes into interchangeable component parts. Analysis is in some sense antithetical to integrity, which means analysis is antithetical to integrated forms—analysis gets in the way of clarity. This is what recent neuroscience has explained to us: logic and language inhibit gestalt insight. Recall the second rule from Descartes' *Discourse on Method*: to order things even when they lack an order. This means that structure or form can be reorganized, hammered into logical systems. But if we accept that form is disclosive of reality, that grasping form is the experience of meaning, then Descartes' altering of structure fundamentally alters

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<sup>82</sup> And to repeat: not all forms are meaningful. Good gestalt perception helps us discern meaningful from non-meaningful forms.

meaning itself. This is another way to understand integration: the part cannot be changed without changing the whole, the shape, the form, the meaning.<sup>83</sup>

For something to have clarity or resonance requires integration. Integrative is not merely additive. Putting parts together is not necessarily integrative unless the parts resonate, unless they have some internal coherence above and beyond their external juxtaposition. A good example is a musical chord, made up of distinct notes, each of which exists in its own right, yet, when played together, combine to form a whole, a chord that sounds a certain way (bright, joyous, ominous) *because of* the sonic relations between its constitutive notes. To alter any one note changes the entire chord, which exists only because of a particular arrangement of notes. But we should not be misled into thinking that only the notes have independent existence. The whole—the chord in this case—also has an independent existence in that it is something qualitatively different from any one of its component parts.

What is of importance later on for my readings of Plato and Zhuangzi is that in a resonant form, we must give equal attention to the parts and to the whole, to the particular and to the abstract. The two go hand-in-hand, and part of my contention is that modern philosophy too often leaves behind the particular parts. Resonant forms often generate meaning associatively, not analytically. We might arrive at some conclusion or insight not after being led logically or argumentatively, but because one tone leads to

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<sup>83</sup> Resonant form has conceptual cousins, especially in Platonic scholarship. Leo Strauss famously argues for “logographic necessity,” the principle that, in reading Plato, one should operate under the assumption that everything in the text is where it is for a reason, from the smallest particle to the grandest metaphor. While this leads Strauss to pay admirable attention to the subtlest details in Plato, it does not spare him from reading the dialogues teleologically. More on this below.



another, because the vibrations of one bell set other bells ringing.<sup>84</sup> Like the bell's vibrations, associations and meanings are there, they are just not logical-analytic. Resonant forms embody this, and so recognizing a resonant form is a way of recognizing meaningful thought that is not presented in a logical-analytic system. The idea is that clarity (impactful resonance) can operate in more than one way.

Let me sum up. Poetic philosophy is thinking in love with clarity, but clarity understood as that which enables us to see, the experience of being struck by something resounding. Because philosophy is *in love* with clarity, it seeks out things that resonate. What resonates? Forms. And meaning is the experience of encountering and recognizing a resonant form. Gestalt thought supplies the background scaffolding for all this. Language, analysis, logic, systems—all the modes and tools of analytic thought are actually *inhibitive* to gestalt thinking, to experiencing meaning through resonant forms. Modern philosophy's loyalty to analysis means that it deafens itself to alternative sources of meaning. In the case of Plato and Zhuangzi, we have rich texts of many dimensions not amenable to translation into the logical-analytic systems of a contemporary philosophy journal. To ignore or treat teleologically these elements is analogous to rendering gestalt insight into analytic terms or translating a poem from one language to another—my contention is not that it cannot be done but that we lose something in the

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<sup>84</sup> We might think of the difference as one between sequence and series. I feel the warmth of the fireplace and think of summer days as a child, which in turn makes me remember my friend and his birthday, which makes me think of the date and realize the new Congress is sworn in tomorrow. This would be a *series* of thoughts, and they could have occurred in any pattern, any direction (a glimpse of Congress on TV reminds me today is my friend's birthday, which triggers a series of fond memories). A *sequence*, on the other hand, follows logical and temporal structure—I must stack the logs, ignite the kindling, and *then* feel the fire's warmth. No other order will get the job done.

process, *and* that what we lose *is meaningful* if only we are willing to try and make sense of it on its own terms.

“*But now it sounds like you’re projecting backwards. Are you saying that Plato and Zhuangzi were gestalt theorists and we can’t understand their works unless we too become gestalt theorists? What’s the exact connection you’re trying to draw?*” Gestalt theory is a model—that’s all—but a very helpful model that explains something about how humans experience the world and meaning. It remains to me to show why Plato and Zhuangzi specifically benefit from poetic philosophy and its gestalt thought foundation. Chapter Three will explicitly deal with Platonic metaphysics and gestalts, but that is a more particular argument with its own context. For now, let me explain why the *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi* suggest a poetic reading.

## **§8, Interpreting Plato Poetically**

Modern professional philosophy tries hard to explain away or avoid completely those parts of the *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi* that do not fit into a systematic model. Consider a few examples. Julia Annas, representative of orthodox Plato scholarship, writes the following of the Myth of Er in Book X of the *Republic*:

The Myth of Er is a painful shock...[whose]...vulgarity seems to pull us right down to the level of Cephalus...The bulk of the *Republic* is Plato’s most successful attempt...Ideas that have powerful expression in the main coherent body of the book are presented at the end in a much cruder form, which Plato none the less believes can add to our understanding. And so the *Republic*, a powerful and otherwise impressively unified book, acquired its lame and messy ending.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Annas 1981, 349 and 253.

Annas makes no attempt to *listen*, to try and hear Plato's music. Instead, the same Plato who has "powerful expression" and an "impressively unified book" somehow manages to trip at the finish line with a "lame and messy ending." Or consider Terence Irwin, equally exemplary in Plato scholarship, who writes that "we must sometimes try to free... doctrines from their distorting context."<sup>86</sup> In other words, we need to save Plato's writing from Plato's writing. These philosophers approach Plato's writings with (1) a predetermined idea of what Plato is up to and (2) a biased notion of what counts as philosophy at all.

If Irwin and Annas represent scholarship deaf to form entirely, we must still contend with scholarship that *does* attend to form but in a teleological way. Teleological readings hold that while the poetic elements of Plato's dialogues may be important, they are only important as a *means to some end*, as a key to unlocking the philosophical doctrines inside. This is a clear case of privileging the abstract whole above the parts, of treating the chord as something separate from its constitutive notes.<sup>87</sup> Let me give two brief examples of this teleological reading: René Schaerer and Thomas Szlezák.

Schaerer observes that Plato's "written oeuvre is, in many respects, terribly, hopelessly complex: contradictions, obscurities, bizarreries about."<sup>88</sup> Schaerer interprets the dialogues according to the Plato's Theory of the Forms. The goal of the dialogues is to

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<sup>86</sup> Irwin 1979: 3.

<sup>87</sup> For a wide-ranging and thorough overview of Plato interpretation that convincingly argues against orthodox interpretations that try to view Socrates as Plato's mouthpiece or to find systematic doctrines lurking beneath the surface of the dialogues, see Corlett 2005.

<sup>88</sup> Schaerer 1969, 9. Translations of Schaerer are gratefully taken from Schur 2014 with occasional modifications.

grasp Being itself, true reality, the Forms, “but because this thing is inaccessible to language, it follows that the dialogue finds its fulcrum outside of itself, on a superior plane, and that the rules presiding over its composition are not immanent to it, but transcendent.”<sup>89</sup> The dialogues are *about* the Forms but they also *give access to* the Forms. Because the Forms cannot be rendered in language (à la the *Seventh Letter* and the *Phaedrus*), the key to unlocking the dialogues (the Forms) ends up being outside of the dialogues. Schaerer goes on to say that “the text aspires to overcome” and that the literary form “is only a play of allusions.”<sup>90</sup> He concludes: “One can therefore affirm that Plato wrote nothing, in the sense that one says Socrates knew nothing and said nothing.”<sup>91</sup> Socrates’ knowing nothing is analogous to Plato’s writing nothing. Of course, Socrates does know things (most famously he knows his own ignorance), and likewise Plato does of course write things. Plato writes only to get us closer to the Forms, and in this way Plato is not truly a writer at all. The literary form of the dialogues is just an illusory mess concealing the truth.

Thomas Szlezák, influenced by the Tübingen School, believes that the dialogues require supplementation from oral instruction: “the dialogues are to be read as fragments of Plato’s philosophy with a propensity to encourage the reader and at the same time to point beyond themselves. But the form must be regarded as essential for the content.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 250-251.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Szlezák 1999, 118. For a recent collection of work about and by the Tübingen School of Plato interpretation, see Nikulin 2012. In brief, this collection of scholars are those who most strongly advocate for an “unwritten doctrines” approach to Plato.

Szlezák (1) does pay attention to the poetic dimensions of Plato and (2) believes that Plato has firm doctrines. But for Szlezák, the dialogues are only stimulants leading to further education. On this protreptic view, the dialogues aim at something beyond the dialogues themselves. If the dialogues do their job, the reader is led away from the dialogues entirely. Szlezák echoes Schaerer closely when he writes: “From the start Plato conceives of philosophical writing...as writing whose content must be transcended if it is to be fully understood.”<sup>93</sup> Both interpreters take for granted that “philosophical writing” operates differently than any other sort of writing. Here, I think, we can detect the sort of partitioning characteristic of modern professional philosophy.

Both Schaerer and Szlezák take seriously written form, but both do so only *in order to* achieve something else: knowledge of transcendent Being (Schaerer) and Plato’s esoteric teachings (Szlezák). Their approaches instrumentalize the dialogues. Teleological readings also betray a logical circularity. Note Szlezák’s phrasing: “...Plato conceives of philosophical writing...” How does Szlezák know that Plato conceives of philosophical writing in *this* way rather than *that* way? How does Szlezák know that Plato conceives of writing as *philosophical* as opposed to any other way?<sup>94</sup> These are questions that can only be answered with recourse to the dialogues, dialogues that Szlezák interprets according to a belief about Plato that he cannot possibly *a priori* justify. Schaerer too exhibits circular reasoning in interpreting the dialogues according to a theory of Forms present in the dialogues themselves. There are two ways to look at this. First, Schaerer and Szlezák base

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>94</sup> To say nothing of the difference between *philosophical* writing and any other sort of writing.

their interpretations of the dialogues on principles completely external to the dialogues, or, second, they base their interpretations of the dialogues on assumptions about Plato's intentions that cannot possibly be known from the dialogues. Either way, the reasoning is circular.

Starting in the 1980s, Platonic scholarship witnessed a rise in studies that attended to literary form.<sup>95</sup> This sea change was heralded by several scholars and with multiple published collections that made it appear as if we had moved beyond the days of context-blind theoretical reading.<sup>96</sup> Gerald Press, a leader of the shift, writes that the “dramatic and literary characteristics of the dialogues *must* be taken into consideration.”<sup>97</sup> H.S. Thayer articulates the position thus: “...the main idea is that the dramatic structure and qualities of the spoken dialogue are intrinsically part of the meaning of speech in the dialogue.”<sup>98</sup> Figures as diverse as Leo Strauss, Derrida, and Gadamer have applied their methods to literary form in Plato.<sup>99</sup> We have reached a point in Platonic scholarship where “a narrow focus on the philosopher's doctrines” has been replaced with an “increased attention to features of writing now recognized as literary: features such as characterization, setting, plot, and wordplay.”<sup>100</sup> A good example of this current state is

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<sup>95</sup> The original arguments in the modern era for taking Plato's written form seriously come from Schleiermacher in the 1800s. Most Plato scholars do not go this far back, but Gerald Press, something of a dean of the history of Plato interpretation, does credit Schleiermacher.

<sup>96</sup> Collections and studies include Griswold 2001, Clay 2000, Gordon 1999, Gonzalez 1995. I deal with more specific teleological readings of the *Phaedrus* in Chapter Two.

<sup>97</sup> Press 1995, 5.

<sup>98</sup> Thayer 1993, 47.

<sup>99</sup> Strauss 1964, Derrida 1981, and Gadamer 1980 and 1991.

<sup>100</sup> Schur 2014, 11.

Debra Nails' book on Platonic prosopography, a study of dramatic-historical characters across the dialogues.<sup>101</sup> This book already would have been unthinkable under the old orthodoxy, but note Christopher Rowe's review: "...we have come to realise that almost any aspect of a Platonic dialogue may help to throw light on what it is *for*, even, or especially, *philosophically*."<sup>102</sup> Notice that Rowe praises Nails' study *because* it helps illuminate something of Plato's philosophy. Rowe welcomes learning about characterization in the dialogues *in order to* learn more about Plato's philosophy. Teleology remains.

In all these cases, there is an effort to understand Plato systematically. This is why the poetic elements of Plato's dialogues need to be explained *in terms of* the Theory of the Forms or Platonic Realism or whatever. But in the end, any interpretations or ideas about Plato can only come from the dialogues, and if whole swathes of the dialogues are ignored or read only to support our prior understanding of Plato, then why bother reading them at all? In reading a text, poetic philosophy demands that we attend to the whole orchestra before we claim to know anything about the symphony being played. In Zwicky's words, "to attend is not necessarily to take action; it is, first and foremost, to listen."<sup>103</sup> In a debate, failure to listen to our interlocutor leaves us incapable of responding (or resonating) to them. Failure to listen also disrespects our interlocutor, leaves them feeling invisible, insignificant. We might go so far as to say that failure to

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<sup>101</sup> Nails 2002.

<sup>102</sup> Rowe 2003, 250.

<sup>103</sup> Zwicky 1995, §142.

listen, to attend to our conversational partner is unethical, a form of selfish neglect. So too, I think, for readings of Plato more interested in explicating how this or that passage fits with some preconceived or orthodox notion of “Platonism” than in paying attention to what Plato wrote.

Poetic philosophy approaches Plato’s dialogues without any predetermined idea of what Plato’s doctrines are. Plato nowhere in the dialogues speaks in his own voice. I resolutely deny that we can use the dialogues to discover Plato’s own particular beliefs, let alone any systematic doctrines or theories the man may have held. Modern scholars’ insistence on ironing out all the contradictions in the Platonic dialogues to get everything to fit into a neat system says more about them and their commitments and understanding of philosophy than about Plato. Evidence from the *Seventh Letter* confirms this, when Plato in his own voice tells us that his philosophy “cannot be expressed in words like other studies.”<sup>104</sup> Trying to extract a Theory of Forms from the dialogues is like trying to extract a Theory of Social Justice from Shakespeare’s plays. It’s not that it can’t be done, it’s that the results are questionable at best and that the whole process seems like a willful misunderstanding of the plays.

I do not mean to suggest that Plato wasn’t trying to communicate *anything* in his writing. It is implausible that Plato would spend so much time writing and polishing and publishing so many complex works if he did not have something to say. This would be like suggesting that Beethoven had no motivating thoughts or experiences to express when he wrote the *Ninth Symphony*, especially its famous “Ode to Joy” in the fourth movement. But

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<sup>104</sup> *Letter VII*, 341c: ῥητὸν γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἔστιν ὡς ἄλλα μαθήματα.



this is not to say that there is a single message or, worse, a systematic doctrine lurking behind the music. Similarly, Plato's dialogues undoubtedly express complex ideas and communicate experiences of many sorts, but this point alone does not entitle us to attribute to Plato this or that systematic doctrine. Such systematic doctrines might be true (I don't think they are), but given that the overwhelming approach to Plato in the modern era has been to either ignore or treat teleologically his poetic dimensions, I want to push back in the opposite direction. The goal is not to reassert the superiority of form over and against content. Poetic philosophy insists on the importance of form *and* content, or, better, tries to think without the dichotomy at all. Formal elements of a text are not important because they carry or lead to some philosophical content. Such thinking (1) abstracts philosophy away from form and its allies (the body, style, feelings, sensation, etc.) and (2) makes it seem as if certain formal features can be dismissed. This would be like dismissing certain notes in a chord, certain instruments from a symphony. Yes, the trumpets may predominate a certain movement, but that does not mean the woodwinds matter any less. Analysis is as natural to human beings as is hunger, the capacity for love or horror, our sexual desires, and so on. The problem comes when we elevate analysis at the expense of everything else, and when we expect even ancient authors to have done the same.

### **§9, Interpreting Zhuangzi Poetically**

The *Zhuangzi* lends itself to poetic philosophy for several reasons. To start with, the definition of philosophy as thinking in love with clarity removes entirely the question of whether or not early China has philosophy: we have a wide array of texts that exhibit an

obvious desire to perceive and express some kind of thought that resonates, that strikes readers as meaningful. The larger debate about whether or not we should ascribe to the intellectual activities of early China the word “philosophy” is beyond my scope here. In general, I agree with G.E.R. Lloyd that the term “philosophy” is more an obstacle than anything else for anyone wishing to study the history of thought, in China or even in Greece.<sup>105</sup>

I do, however, think that much of the friction in debates about philosophy in China arises from modern professional philosophy’s narrow view of what is or isn’t philosophy. A prime example is François Jullien, who resolutely denies to early China any philosophy, instead contrasting Chinese sagely wisdom with Western philosophical truth.<sup>106</sup> Even a cursory reading of Jullien will reveal, however, that he is working with a model of philosophy against which I have argued so far—fixated on abstraction, divorced from particulars, deaf to resonance, blind to gesture, unwelcoming to paradox, beholden to analytic logic, etc. I would rather sidestep the whole debate by pointing out that a more

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<sup>105</sup> Lloyd 2002, Lloyd and Sivin 2002.

<sup>106</sup> Jullien’s views range across his large corpus, but a succinct distillation of these arguments appears in the essay, “Did Philosophers Have to Become Fixated on Truth?” (Jullien 2002).

capacious notion of philosophy ought to lead us to recognizing philosophy in more places than we traditionally have.<sup>107</sup>

My arguments about the *Phaedrus* proceed on the safe assumption that the *Phaedrus* has behind it a unified authorial presence—namely, Plato. I strongly disagree with those who seek Plato’s personal theories in the text, but I am in complete agreement that Plato wrote the text to express *some* meaning—else why bother writing at all? My quarrel with orthodox Platonism is that I believe that the *something* Plato wanted to communicate is not exhausted in logical-analytic systems. I do not think we can say with certainty *what* Plato thought or wanted to say. The closest we can get is to try and see his texts with as little distortion as possible, to *attend* to them. Orthodox Platonism and modern philosophy each bring their own sorts of distortion. Orthodox Platonism veils the text in preconceptions like the Theory of the Forms or Plato’s Idealism or Socrates-as-Plato’s-mouthpiece. Modern philosophy clouds not the text but we the readers by biasing us towards what is or is not philosophically valuable. In our carelessness, we then apply these same biases to Plato’s ancient text.

One obvious difference, then, moving from the *Phaedrus* to the *Zhuangzi* is that the latter text lacks this authorial presence. Nobody seriously doubts that, if nothing else, a

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<sup>107</sup> In this sense, I take a different approach to scholars like Bryan W. Van Norden or Jay Garfield, both of whom represent the (very slowly) growing push in professional philosophy to expand philosophy to non-Western cultures. Much of Van Norden’s recent work is occupied with convincing philosophers that non-Western philosophy (he focuses mainly on China, which is his expertise) is worthy of the name and thus worthy of attention. Van Norden does this, however, mostly by showing how figures like Mencius and Zhuangzi fit neatly with the values, concerns, and even styles of modern professional philosophy. That is, Mencius has as much systematic and analytic rigor as the professional philosopher could ask for. While obviously a welcome change in philosophy, I find this approach limited in that it inevitably reinforces a stenotic model of philosophy. The goal should not be to squeeze all these different figures into a shape recognizable to Western modern philosophy departments but rather to get modern philosophy to recognize different shapes. See Van Norden 2017.

singular man named Plato sat down to write the entirety of the text. The same cannot be said of the *Zhuangzi*, which is a composite text, written by many different hands and groups over centuries.<sup>108</sup> Any sense in which the text hangs together must be carefully distinguished from the literary unity we encounter in the *Phaedrus*.<sup>109</sup>

Michael Nylan, an historian, bemoans the failure of philosophers to reckon with the historical context out of which early Chinese philosophy emerged, saying, for example, “most philosophers seem blissfully unaware of the specific character of manuscript culture as opposed to print culture, which came only in late imperial China.”<sup>110</sup> Manuscript culture presents a different notion of what exactly a text is than does the print culture we take for granted. One big difference is that “[t]eaching and transmission were largely oral, with most manuscripts prepared *as aides to memory*, much

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<sup>108</sup> The literature on the composition and dating of the *Zhuangzi*, in both English and Chinese scholarship, is vast. It is far beyond my scope and also not my goal to wade into these debates. I am less interested in arguing for the date or origin of this and that part of the text than I am in working from the fact that the text is the way it is. For a succinct and balanced overview of the debates and proponents of various views, see Kohn 2014. Among the more notable studies are those of A.C. Graham and Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢. Graham 1981, influential for decades in Anglophone scholarship, analyzes the *Zhuangzi* thematically and stylistically, attributing different parts of the text to six distinct schools of thought. Liu 1994 rejects Graham’s six schools and instead identifies three strains within the *Zhuangzi*. Controversially, Liu also argues that we should treat the *Zhuangzi* more or less as a unified whole in its transmitted form. Nylan 2015 (among others), criticizes Liu for this position on the grounds that it ignores the historical realities of early manuscript culture and prefers to treat the *Zhuangzi* as if it was somehow transmitted through time as a unified and organized whole.

<sup>109</sup> This is why it is important to understand what I mean by coherence: *not* a purposefully created whole (although it can be that) but rather a whole that means something. Coherence does not require authorial intent even if authorial intent can sometimes help account for coherence. Part of this study will give an example of how coherence can function in two texts as different as the *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi*.

<sup>110</sup> Nylan 2015, 92.

like lecture notes today.”<sup>111</sup> Nylan lists the major implications for philosophers who work with texts from before the print era, which I briefly repurpose and rephrase below.<sup>112</sup>

First, “[n]early all pre-imperial Chinese texts are ‘composite in nature.’”<sup>113</sup> Composite texts lacked all the trappings we take for granted in our printed editions: punctuation, pagination, paragraphing, and so on. Authors instead presented an intelligible sense of order “via collage, with gestures, allusions, and quotations (often as not unidentified), ‘based on a logic of signs referring to sources lying outside the text.’”<sup>114</sup> It is virtually impossible, especially at our historical remove, to know which bits of a text belong originally to any other text. Joachim Gentz has shown how the Classical Chinese language lends itself to this sort of patchwork coherence by deploying parallelism, enumeration, referential signifiers, etc., all of which take semantically separate chunks from various sources and interweave them.<sup>115</sup> It is difficult to find a text from this period without such features. Nylan herself shows how arguments tend to be structured not as sustained discourses but “through the studied repetition of particles and similar devices.”<sup>116</sup> A major takeaway from the composite nature of texts should be that what

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Philosopher David Hall makes a similar point with a different argument. Hall notes how philosophers working on China often regard sinologists and historians as too concerned with dusty manuscripts, with precise dating, and with technicalities to ever satisfy the philosopher’s desire to just talk about interesting ideas in the text. Conversely, he admits that the philosopher is too often willing to leap into the realm of speculation and argument without giving due respect to the texts, culture, and language. See Hall 2002.

<sup>113</sup> Nylan 2015., 93.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Gentz 2015.

<sup>116</sup> Nylan 2015, 93. See in particular Nylan 2011.

often seem to us moderns to be gaps or inconsistencies or “mere” repetitions or even plagiarism are simply not once we consider the historical context.

Second, because of the composite nature of manuscript texts, commentaries are essential in a way that they are not for Plato. In Nylan’s words, “no text in classical Chinese was composed to be read ‘literally’, meaning, apart from related commentaries or other forms of expository traditions.”<sup>117</sup> In the case of the *Zhuangzi*, there is no ur-text upon which commentaries have been sedimented. Instead, the closest thing we have to an ur-text just *is* what was probably originally a commentary, or, a collection of various writings edited and organized not by anyone named Zhuang Zhou but by Guo Xiang 郭象 (ca. 252–312 CE).<sup>118</sup> To phrase it bluntly: there is no such thing as the original *Zhuangzi*. When philosophers claim to be reading the *Zhuangzi* in the same way they read Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, they are making a category mistake.

Third, one way to think of philosophy, certainly in the continental tradition, is as a history of conversations between seminal figures.<sup>119</sup> This view runs into trouble in early Chinese philosophy because “we haven’t a clue how to responsibly sketch the ‘influence’ of one text upon another.”<sup>120</sup> In fact, given the way manuscripts circulated without anything like standard editions, “we can hardly ever be sure that texts circulating under

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<sup>117</sup> Nylan 2015, 93.

<sup>118</sup> Kohn 2014, Chapter 1 and Ziporyn 2009a. I deal more directly with Guo Xiang’s lasting influence on *Zhuangzi* later.

<sup>119</sup> Rorty 2007 uses this model of conversation-throughout-history to describe continental philosophy, which he more aptly names “conversational philosophy.”

<sup>120</sup> Nylan 2015, 93.

identical titles had identical content.”<sup>121</sup> Due to the way texts were constructed in this manuscript culture, we have no firm ground from which to say “*This Thinker responds to That Thinker.*” This matters for modern philosophy a great deal because philosophy is seen as the articulation of a singular position over and against other positions, argued for or against in systematic analysis. The underlying idea is that a singular position, being singular, will be free from contradiction—i.e., logically clear. But if the texts we have resist in their very nature the ascription of authorial positions, then the model of modern professional philosophy ceases to apply.

Poetic philosophy recommends itself to the realities of excavated texts and manuscript culture. One advantage of poetic philosophy is that I am not searching for any authorial position or authorial arguments. Examples to the contrary are legion. Chad Hansen reads Zhuangzi as an ethical relativist.<sup>122</sup> Chris Fraser disagrees and instead sees Zhuangzi not as a relativist but as a skeptic about values such that Zhuangzi advocates a form of “metaethical” pluralism.<sup>123</sup> Lisa Raphals finds in Zhuangzi skepticism of a therapeutic kind, one that is less about epistemic or moral claims but about helping us live a life free from harmful rigidity and misleading certitude.<sup>124</sup> This list could go on and on, but my aim here is not to review competing philosophical interpretations of the *Zhuangzi*, nor to support one or the other (even if I do find some more compelling than others). All

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>122</sup> Hansen 1983 and 2003.

<sup>123</sup> Fraser 2009.

<sup>124</sup> Raphals 1994. Admittedly, Raphals’ position does not require the same sort of authorial unity as most others.

these scholars, in one way or another, still ascribe to the *Zhuangzi* a position or argument in a way that does not fully reckon with the *Zhuangzi*'s composite nature. Bryan Van Norden, in an article titled "Competing Interpretations of the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*," suggests that all these clashing readings arise from "tensions or apparent contradictions in [the] text."<sup>125</sup> Van Norden proposes an "attempt to reconcile apparent contradictions before we start making efforts to explain why they are there."<sup>126</sup> He does this by "consider[ing]...a handful of interpretations of the Inner Chapters," but this raises problems on philosophical and textual-historical levels.<sup>127</sup>

First, contradiction is anathema to modern professional philosophy, but not necessarily to poetic philosophy. A contradiction is a logical impossibility, but there are ways of being meaningful, of making sense beyond analytic logic (e.g., a poem maybe full of contradiction but nevertheless *mean*). Second, the fact that the *Zhuangzi* is full of tensions and contradictions should not surprise us given its composite, manuscript nature. Modern philosophy's demand that we smooth out these tensions is really, then, a demand that we make the text other than what it is, that we treat a composite text as a univocal treatise suitable for publication in an academic philosophy journal. Sure, we *could* translate a twenty-character *jueju* 絕句 poem into English, but it's impossible to retain the original meaning if we do. Third, Van Norden makes an arbitrary choice in dealing only with the Inner Chapters (*Nei pian* 內篇) of the *Zhuangzi*, leaning on the widespread view

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<sup>125</sup> Van Norden 1996, 247.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.



that the Inner Chapters represent the most reliable source of the writings of Zhuang Zhou himself, a view popularized in Anglophone scholarship by Graham.<sup>128</sup> Esther Klein, however, has more recently put this widespread but mistaken view in the ground.<sup>129</sup> Wim De Reu explains that “the scholarship is characterized by a tendency to reduce later *Zhuangzi* chapters [non-Inner Chapters] to convenient supporting material [for the Inner Chapters].”<sup>130</sup> The focus on the Inner Chapters attempts to have some solid and non-contradictory argument ascribable to a unified singular author—in other words, it is an impulse of modern professional philosophy, but the facts simply do not bear it.

Poetic philosophy is uninterested in placing Zhuangzi in this or that position, and my point here is that the historical and material realities of the *Zhuangzi* make it near impossible to place the text anyway. The *Zhuangzi* thus recommends itself to poetic philosophy because the material realities of the text that so stymie philosophy (when philosophers choose to notice them) are no impediment for poetic philosophy. Poetic philosophy craves resonant form, craves to perceive *how* a text means, how a text gestures. Of less interest is *what* the text means (its precise argumentative position). The experience of meaning is the experience of presence, the experience of being confronted with what is, by seeing or grasping something in all its complexity or contradiction. A poetic reading of the *Zhuangzi*, then, is one that attempts to pluck certain strings to make the text resound, to shine a light on certain elements to make the text glow. This is different from

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<sup>128</sup> Graham 1981, 1986, and 1989. The attribution of the Inner Chapters to Zhuang Zhou himself is so widespread that one can find it in the introductory remarks of most any philosophical work done in English on the *Zhuangzi* in the last thirty or so years.

<sup>129</sup> Klein 2011.

<sup>130</sup> De Reu 2015, 245

ascribing any “-ism” to the text, or from positioning Zhuangzi against competing thinkers from the Warring States.

Poetic philosophy attends to form, and in the case of a composite text, form is all we have. We do not know for certain what the authors and editors and compilers of the *Zhuangzi* thought, whom they were in dialogue with, what their allusions and intertextualities reference. All we have is the text itself. To mean is to have resonant form, so none of this inhibits our ability to explore the meaning of the *Zhuangzi*. The *Zhuangzi* has no system, and modern philosophy’s insistence on looking for one leads to endless debate (it also, ironically enough, seems to ignore one of the key lessons in the *Zhuangzi* itself—more on this later). But where a composite text may lack *system*, it need not lack *coherence*. The intuition of coherence in a text is the intuition that the text meaningfully hangs together, even if in an extra-logical, non-linguistic, non-systematic, non-analytic way. De Reu, in a different argument, makes this helpful point: “text-historical factors can *never* settle a debate on questions of a text’s coherence... The question of coherence can *only* be settled by taking a text at face value and by trying to uncover its internal architecture.”<sup>131</sup> I take “internal architecture” to be another version of Wertheimer’s “inner structure.” While the *Zhuangzi* may at first seem like, to borrow a phrase from De Reu, a ragbag of odds and ends, I think there are gestalts to be perceived among the apparent chaos. My poetic reading of the *Zhuangzi* will gesture at a few of them.

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<sup>131</sup> De Reu 2015, 246, my italics. De Reu’s whole essay is an admirable reading of Chapter 26 of the *Zhuangzi* on the premise that this so-called Miscellaneous Chapter (*za pian* 雜篇) is not “a ragbag of odds and ends” but has a meaningful coherence. To prove his intuition, De Reu analyzes the rhetoric of the text, its form, to show how the entire chapter performs its content in its literary form. In my terminology, he shows *how* the text means, and in so doing he proves that seemingly unimportant parts are actually integrated elements of the meaningful whole.

## §10, Poetic Language, or, Ghost Ribs

The *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi* are poetic texts and as such can benefit from poetic philosophy. So what exactly is a poetic text? In short, a poetic text is a text that tries to use language to express something ineffable even as it is aware of its inability to do so. Language, as I said, is strongly on the side of analytic thought, of calculative reason and logical systems. Gestalt insights resist all of this and so resist linguistic expression, but that doesn't stop us from trying. Poetic language is language that makes the attempt while simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility of the task.<sup>132</sup>

To say that something is ineffable is not to say that it is nonsensical or meaningless or unclear. That is the whole point of poetic philosophy: to say that clarity need not be logical-analytic, to say that meaning need not be linguistic or calculable. This doesn't solve the problem of how to render such experiences and intuitions in language. Language is innately logical and sequential, ideally suited to analysis. Language isolates and distinguishes among meanings: conjugations, declensions, number, gender, tone, syntax, and so on. Language wouldn't be language if it didn't allow us to pin down meaning, to refer to *this* and not *that*. Language allows us to see and manipulate the world in piecemeal, which dampens our perceptions of meaningful wholes, deafens our perception of resonant forms.

Certain kinds of language *do* resonate, however, and this is language that I call poetic. Not all language is poetic, but some language displays an awareness of its own

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<sup>132</sup> Thus, a poetic text need not be a poem. There are some poems that are, in my sense, more poetic than others, and some prose can be more poetic than some poetry. I am indebted to one of my teachers and readers, Dr. Yang Ye, for his suggestion that I think about the differences between "poetic," "poem," and "poetry."

limitations and because of this awareness tries to make meaning less explicitly (e.g., through rhythm, gesture, irony, rhyme, etc.). I may experience some fleeting glimmer of nostalgia and struggle to communicate it to others. Because I am human and inescapably linguistic, I will try, but because language cannot hope to fully articulate certain experiences of the self or the world, my language will inevitably fail me. Some resort to non-linguistic expression (dance, music, and so on), but for those stuck with words, there is poetic language.

Language is poetic when it tries to express the inexpressible knowing full well that this is an impossible task. Plato and Zhuangzi, I believe, were keenly aware of this situation. One of the most arresting and studied features of the *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi* is that both texts seem at points to be self-aware. The *Phaedrus* is a beautifully wrought text that contains in itself a withering critique of the written word. The *Zhuangzi* attacks not only written words but human language itself despite being a virtuoso linguistic artifact. I read these “self-aware” gestures as proof that the texts strain against themselves. Think of poetic language like Heraclitus’ famous bow:

οὐ ζυγιάσιν ὄκως διαφερόμενον ἑωτῶ ὁμολογέει· παλίντροπος ἀρμονίη ὄκωσπερ τόξου  
καὶ λύρης.<sup>133</sup>

They don’t perceive how, being brought apart, it is brought together with itself—a back-bending harmony, as in a bow and lyre.

Poetic language pulls against itself the way a bow works precisely by pulling against itself. Without the strain or tension the bow does not fire, the lyre does not sound. Poetic language can have resonant form despite being language precisely because it exhibits the

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<sup>133</sup> Heraclitus, D-K Fr. 51. My translation.

same sort of tension. Much of my discussion of the *Phaedrus* and *Zhuangzi* will be given over to providing examples of this tensive language that acknowledges its own insufficiency.

Poetic language is language that tries to say more than it can, it tries to bear a load (meaning) that it shouldn't be able to bear. Zwicky phrases the idea thus:

To the extent that it does succeed, [poetic] expression *points*. That is, we are not primarily aware of the gesture of expression itself; instead, we perceive, 'through' the gesture as it were, what the gesture is focussed [*sic.*] on. To the extent that it succeeds, [poetic] expression bears the trace of ontological resonance. If it does not bear this trace, it cannot be responsible to what it is attempting to convey. [Poetic] *expression can use words—but in doing so, it must reach beyond their syntax.*<sup>134</sup>

The experience of clarity or resonant form is a gestalt insight, an insight into how things hang together. This insight defies language, but because humans are just as inescapably linguistic as we are anything else, even our non-linguistic experience craves linguistic expression. Lyric poetry is the type of language most aware of this limit. "Lyric art," Zwicky says, "is the fullest expression of the hunger for wordlessness."<sup>135</sup> Lyric poetry is the type of art that most exemplifies words that crave wordlessness. Language cuts us off from the world in a way, and lyric poetry shows the human mind trying to grapple with saying something, something that words are inadequate to say.

Kay Ryan expresses this very paradox in a lyric poem called *Post-Construction*.

Who knows better  
than the builder  
not to trust  
a structure, where  
it's off kilter,  
how too few

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., §133. My italics and alterations.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., §132.

rafters bear  
too much roof?  
And still it  
may stand, proof  
against craft,  
strong as though  
ghost ribs  
had been added  
after one left.<sup>136</sup>

A lyric poet knows better than “to trust / a structure, where / it’s off kilter.” That is, the lyric poet knows that in the language of the poem, the “rafters bear / too much roof.” Poetic expression in words requires words that gesture at something beyond themselves. Poetic expression in language uses language that does not attempt to perfectly and completely say everything. This is why, when we read Plato or Zhuangzi and expect systematic doctrines or explicit, analytic arguments, we will be disappointed. The problem is that our disappointment often manifests in blaming Plato and Zhuangzi rather than readjusting our expectations—expectations that stem from our analytic approach to the texts. In the end, the *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi* still “stand, proof / against craft, / strong as though / ghost ribs / had been added.” What Ryan calls “ghost ribs” can be understood here as the meaning blocked to us by language towards which language nevertheless tries to gesture. As when someone sees a ghost, the poetic text asks “*do you see it? am I alone or can you discern what I do?*” My contention is that the *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi* express something meaningful, but that they do so poetically—that is, their meaning is expressed not in systematic analysis or in logical and sequential doctrines but in resonant

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<sup>136</sup> Ryan 2010, 251. This poem plays a role in a study of the *Phaedrus* by Jennifer Rapp (Rapp 2014) from which I have learned much and engage with later on. I repurpose some of Rapp’s vocabulary later on due to our similar areas of focus. Here, I thankfully borrow this poem from her, although she uses it to say something about the self (something I find unclear) and I use it to illustrate a feature of poetic expression.

form. Why would two written texts contain withering condemnations of writing? Ghost ribs. These explicit critiques of writing are one way (and there are others) that the *Phaedrus* and *Zhuangzi* acknowledge the inability of language to fully express human experience. Despite this inability, both texts try. What makes them poetic is that they are alive to their own limitations.

### **§11, Conclusion**

I began with the point that humans are imperfect and characterized by tensions. For example, we want to know but are denied omniscience, we often feel torn between reason and emotion, we are victim to our own imperfect memories, and so on. Poetic philosophy arises from this basic situation. Poetic philosophy rests on features of human thought described by gestalt theory (expressed by Freud as primary process). I think that modern professional philosophy embraces analytic thought (Freud's secondary process) at the expense of any other sort. The problem is that meaning itself is about the perception of gestalts, of resonant forms. Poetic philosophy recognizes form as absolutely essential in the experience of meaning, and so to read the *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi* and recognize their meaning requires a reading that attends to form. In the case of these two texts, that form happens to be poetic—i.e., full of metaphors, imagistic argument, allusions, myth, and so on.

I think Plato and Zhuangzi were alert to the imperfection of human experience. They sensed a tension between the world experienced as a resonant form or whole and as a gathering of mortal individuals who cannot help but analyze and verbalize. The *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi* reflect this tension in their very forms, but it is a tension that

modern professional philosophy tends to overlook. In so overlooking, we miss something both about these ancient writers and about human experience. I certainly cannot in this dissertation set forth a new understanding of all human experience, so I will proceed through a poetic interpretation of the *Phaedrus* and *Zhuangzi*. We live in tension between intuitions of oneness and coherence that we crave to analyze and render in words. The *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi* are made of such words, but they are words propped up by ghost ribs. This dissertation is an attempt to shine a light just so, and thus hopefully gesture at these ghost ribs, at *how* the texts mean.



## CHAPTER II

### THE TORQUED UNITY OF THE PHAEDRUS

The body is made of mud and the wild holiness of wind.<sup>1</sup>

Melanie A. May, *A Body Knows: A Theopoetics of Death and Resurrection*

And still it is not yet enough to have memories. One must be able to forget them when they are many and one must have the great patience *to wait* until they come again. For it is not yet the memories themselves. Not till they have turned to blood within us, to glance and gesture, nameless and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves—not till them can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a verse arises in their midst and goes forth from them.<sup>2</sup>

Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, No. 14

To say more than human things with human voice,  
That cannot be; to say human things with more  
Than human voice, that, also, cannot be;  
To speak humanly from the height or from the depth  
Of human things, that is acutest speech.<sup>3</sup>

Wallace Stevens, *Chocorua to its Neighbors*

### §1, Preamble

The following two chapters apply a poetic philosophical reading to the *Phaedrus* in an attempt to see how the text coheres, to try and make sense of it. This is another way of saying that I will try to show how the *Phaedrus*' form resonates if we strike the right notes, if we see it from certain angles. These two chapters do *not* provide a systematic account of the *Phaedrus*, nor do they try to elucidate parts of the text into this or that doctrinal debate in Plato scholarship. I touch on relevant scholarship as needed, of course, but the primary

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<sup>1</sup> May 1995, 23.

<sup>2</sup> Rilke 2009, 64–65 (originally published 1910).

<sup>3</sup> Stevens 1955, 296–301.

aim here is twofold: (1) apply poetic philosophy to the *Phaedrus* and (2) thereby argue for a Plato very different from that of the orthodox scholarship. That said, to claim that these chapters try to find the resonant form of the *Phaedrus* is, admittedly, somewhat vague, so let me sketch the more focused path I intend to take.

Poetic philosophy does not look for authorial theses but rather tries to make some coherence of the text as it appears to us, to make the text clear in the sense of clarity-as-meaningful. Trying to say that a symphony has a single, doctrinal message is both silly and difficult, and so too with the *Phaedrus*. However, it is quite reasonable for the music critic to draw attention to various motifs, key changes, allusions and influences, thematic arcs, and so on. More, the critic does not draw attention to an arbitrary list of things in the symphony but points out a whole constellation of features with the goal of showing the listener something meaningful about the music, something we would otherwise miss. In other words, there is a way to point out features of the text that will draw out something significant even if that significance is not necessarily Plato's own authorial doctrines. So what is the cohering theme I want to illuminate in my reading of the *Phaedrus*?

I believe that Plato, especially but not only in the *Phaedrus*, depicts human beings as characterized by an essential imperfection—namely, a tension between two opposing forces. On one side, we have reason, divinity, abstraction, memory, and the soul; on the other side we have madness, mortality, particularity, forgetting, and the body. Orthodox Platonism, both the poetically deaf and the teleological varieties, overwhelmingly sees Plato as focusing on the former set of forces, and many of the dialogues including the

*Phaedrus* are read as setting down some sort of self-cultivation model in which we progressively leave behind our mortal imperfections, our forgetfulness, our desiring bodies, our particular attachments, and so on. This self-cultivating, teleological Plato is the Plato of modern professional philosophy, a writer with systematic theories of Forms and immortal souls. As I show in these two chapters, such a Plato is incompatible with the *Phaedrus* itself, and a reason philosophers have overlooked this pressing point is that they read the *Phaedrus* not as a resonant form but as a misshapen treatise.

As argued in the previous chapter, meaning does not only operate within logical-analytic systems. The form of the *Phaedrus* gestures and alludes and whispers at all sorts of meanings, but to make these meanings cohere, we must pay attention to the text, to the form. This is as simple as saying that to fully understand a ringing, we must attend to the bell that vibrates to produce the ringing. So this chapter draws attention to multiple formal features of the *Phaedrus* which, taken collectively, will cohere into a meaningful theme: that Plato sees human imperfection as a feature and not a bug, that human existence is characterized by an array of tensions, and that getting beyond these tensions is not only impossible but would rob us of something innately and beautifully human about ourselves.

This chapter focuses on Plato's deployment of lyric poetry in the *Phaedrus*, specifically through the figures of Stesichorus and Sappho. These two lyric poets, in different ways, highlight tensions between madness and reason, the particular and the abstract, memory and forgetting. By focusing on the importance of these intertextual and

allusive figures, I show that the picture of mortality and the good life that Plato presents in the *Phaedrus* differ drastically from any straightforward endorsement of self-cultivation.

## §2, Setting the Scene

The *Phaedrus* is, if nothing else, a dialogue about love—in this case, *erōs*, erotic love, which encompasses both sexual and romantic love and might even be best translated as “desire.”<sup>4</sup> Socrates begins the story hailing Phaedrus outside the city walls: “*Phaedrus! Where are you going? Where are you coming from?*”<sup>5</sup> Phaedrus, flushed from his morning listening to the sophistic speeches of Lysias, kidnaps Socrates, grips his arm in a vice and refuses to let go until they have exhausted this mood, this craving for *logos*. In the oppressing summer heat, splashing through the riverbank, lying in the shaded grass of a tree, we first hear a *logos* written by the famous Lysias, a speech Phaedrus loved so much he borrowed the scroll to memorize it. Dissatisfied with Lysias’ dispassionate argument that a beautiful boy should grant sexual favors only to a rational man who doesn’t love the boy, Socrates offers his own version of the same argument. And then, before he can offend the god *Erōs* by making the same scurrilous point, Socrates’ *daimonion* (δαίμόνιον) compels him to recant, to sing a palinode—literally an “again ode” (*palin* + *ōidia*)—as a response to his first *logos*. So Phaedrus stimulates the dialogue with his love (*erōs*) of speeches (*logoi*) and his desire (*erōs*) to dialogue with Socrates, and Socrates’ desire for good argument (*logos*) leads him to offer his own version of Lysias’ speech, while Socrates’

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<sup>4</sup> David Halperin, for example, says of *erōs* that “Plato...was not discussing love at all but rather *erōs* (ἔρωος), or passionate sexual desire—a single aspect of what we normally consider love” (Halperin 1985, 161–162).

<sup>5</sup> *Phr.* 227a: ὦ φίλε Φαιδρε, ποῖ δὴ καὶ πόθεν; All translations throughout the dissertation are my own unless otherwise noted.

desire not to offend Erōs and to convert Phaedrus to philosophy compels him to give his palinode. From the very beginning, then, the *logo* of the *Phaedrus* are driven by *erōs*—it is *logos erōtikos*.

*Erōs* in the *Phaedrus* pushes people around, swooping in and compelling love. Phaedrus and Socrates both love discourse, Phaedrus loves Socrates for his mind, Socrates loves Phaedrus because the younger man is too beautiful and too curious not to love. *Erōs* incites the whole philosophical experience of the dialogue, which is especially ironic considering that philosophy gives the the philosopher a sort of freedom, like the prisoners escaped from their chains in the *Republic*'s allegory of the cave. In our quest for wisdom and self-knowledge, we throw off the shackles of opinion and convention, but this freedom comes about through erotic compulsion. We have our first tension in the *Phaedrus*, that between compulsion and freedom.

But *erōs* is more than just a force or desire—*erōs* is also the name of a god (hence Socrates' need to recant his offensive first speech). *Erōs* manifests something physical, bodily, and material as well as something metaphysical, divine, and immaterial. This description of *erōs* seems to explicitly depart from the description offered by Diotima in the *Symposium*.<sup>6</sup> There, Diotima goes to great lengths to emphasize that *erōs* is neither mortal nor divine but essentially something in-between.<sup>7</sup> Here in the *Phaedrus*, *erōs* is not a demigod (*daimōn*) of the in-between but rather *both* a divine *and* a mortal thing *at the same time*. That this is a contradiction is the point, as will become clear. In the *Symposium*,

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Nussbaum 1986, 211.

<sup>7</sup> *Sym.* 198b–204c.

“Diotima’s ladder” describes a progressive ascent powered by *erōs* that ends in our leaving behind our attachments to any particular body (i.e., person) here on earth—the way a beloved smiles, the way the light hits their eyes, the way they look draped in bedsheets or argue or hold a drink or turn a phrase. Such are the particulars we must leave behind in our purgation of the irrational from the soul. The *Phaedrus* calls this view into question.

Martha Nussbaum’s groundbreaking study *The Fragility of Goodness* proposes the *Phaedrus* as Plato’s recantation of his earlier views developed in works like the *Phaedo*, the *Republic*, and the *Symposium*.<sup>8</sup> This earlier Plato tries to insulate human life from the vicissitudes of fate, from the weaknesses brought on by passion, from the fragility of human life. He prizes rationality above all else and banishes poetry because it stirs up emotions. Socrates in the *Symposium* exemplifies this: he does not get drunk, he remains stonily unmoved, emotionally and sexually, at the advances of the beautiful and brilliant Alcibiades, who describes Socrates as a cold statue of a human. Nussbaum sees Alcibiades and Socrates as two competing impulses in the *Symposium*: the former representative of poetry, sexuality, physical love and the body, and the general fragility of human life; the latter representative of philosophy, love of wisdom, and leaving behind the body in favor of tending to the purely rational soul.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Nussbaum 1986, especially chapter 7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 198 and 201: “[the *Symposium*] starkly confronts us with a choice, and at the same time it makes us see so clearly that we cannot choose anything. We see now that philosophy is not fully human; but we are terrified of humanity and what it leads to... Plato offers us a stark choice: on the one hand, the life of Alcibiades, the person ‘possessed’ by the ‘madness’ of personal love; on the other, a life in which the intellectual soul ascends to true insight and stable contemplation by denying the ‘mad’ influence of personal passion.”

But just as Socrates recants his first speech in his palinode, so Plato recants these views in his *Phaedrus*. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato abandons the Socrates of the *Symposium* when he finally describes the good life as one involving passive weakness and the vulnerability brought on by love. Nussbaum makes the following points:

...the *Phaedrus* displays a new view of the role of feeling, emotion, and particular lived the good life... The lover of the *Symposium* also began by loving a single person—or that person’s beauty. But he or she soon moved on to a more general appreciation of beauty, relaxing his or her intense love for the one. The pairs of lovers in the *Phaedrus* never do this. Their search for understanding and goodness is accomplished...in the context of a particular relationship with an individual whose distinctive character is nourished within it... They grasp the good and true not by transcending erotic madness, but inside a passionate life... The best life for a human being is found not by abstracting from the peculiarities of our complex nature, but by exploring that nature and the way of life that it constitutes. Unlike the life of the ascending person in the *Symposium*, this best human life is unstable, always prey to conflict.<sup>10</sup>

Nussbaum makes a subtle and inspiring argument for why Plato may have changed his views in the *Phaedrus*, reading into the biographical tradition to suggest that Plato himself fell in love. The *Phaedrus*, according to Nussbaum, is Plato’s attempt to make room in his “pure crystalline theater of the intellect” for the fact that a life without vulnerability cannot be a good life.<sup>11</sup>

So Nussbaum’s insight is that the *Phaedrus* makes room for *erōs* in the good life, and with *erōs* come the physical body, sexuality, vulnerability, forgetting, particularity, and so on—in short, all the things that orthodox Plato is said to want to move beyond. Because poetic philosophy does not try to locate authorial systems in the text, I do not share Nussbaum’s concern with figuring out how and why the *Phaedrus* fits in with the rest of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 202, 220, and 221.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 133–134.

Plato's so-called doctrines. I do find her reading beautiful and personally formative to my own views, but I want to consider the role of *erōs* in the form of the *Phaedrus* itself. In other words, in what sense is the written form of the *Phaedrus* erotic? I propose that the *Phaedrus* is erotic because it is a love letter of sorts, and understanding it this way will help to explain the deployment of the lyric figures of Stesichorus and Sappho.

### §3, Criticisms of Writing

Perhaps the most common problem in scholarship on the *Phaedrus* is the question of the text's unity or lack thereof.<sup>12</sup> Topically, the *Phaedrus* draws together love, rhetoric, writing, dialectic, the good life, and the soul—and these are just the biggest, most obvious topics. A memorable statement of the problem of unity comes from Paul Shorey, who in his comprehensive overview of the dialogues writes the following:

The contrast between the classical architecture of the *Symposium* and the Gothic art of the *Phaedrus* merely expresses the fact that the two apparently distinct subjects of the *Phaedrus*, love and rhetoric or literary criticism, and the variety of its motives and episodes are not combined in as obvious and harmonious a sequence and unity as are the successive speeches of the *Symposium*. It is not, for that, less interesting and enjoyable in its own way.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> It would be difficult to overstate the popularity of this question in *Phaedrus* scholarship, and it usually features prominently even in books and articles that do not explicitly address the topic. De Vries represents the majority in holding rhetoric as the overarching theme (De Vries 1969), with Charles Griswold suggesting self-knowledge (Griswold 1986), and Rona Burger writing (Burger 1980). Heath and Hackforth, while taking up different arguments, both conclude that the *Phaedrus* has no thematic unity: Heath claiming that the disparate elements of the dialogue belong together only insofar as they prod the reader towards insights (Heath 1989), and Hackforth claiming that the disparate elements outline a method of practicing philosophy (Hackforth 1952). Rowe 1989 responds critically to Heath. Zina Giannopoulou's observation that "[t]he elaborate dramatic construct of the first half [of the *Phaedrus*] anticipates an important theoretical preoccupations of the second half" is indicative of a subtler approach that seeks to unify the *Phaedrus*' intellectual content without sacrificing attention to its form (Giannopoulou 2010). Daniel Werner echoes this tendency and suggests that love, rhetoric, and the nature of philosophy all unify the *Phaedrus*, and he explores myth as the cohesive substance drawing them all together (Werner 2012). Other major works on the topic include Nicholson 1999, Ferrari 1994 and 1987, Mueller 1975, Sinaiko 1965, and Winnington-Ingram 1953. Moss 2012 is a good overview to the problem of unity.

<sup>13</sup> Shorey 1965, 150.



I agree with Shorey that the Gothic complexity of the *Phaedrus* is no less interesting or enjoyable than any other dialogue, but I would add this: the *Phaedrus* does not need straightening out, does not need balance or symmetry anymore than a Gothic cathedral does. This echoes my point from Chapter One that gestalts or primary process thoughts do not need translation into analytic language so much as to be understood on their own terms. To poetic philosophy, the so-called problem of unity of the *Phaedrus* is no problem at all. It only becomes one when we assume that the “classical architecture” of a systematic philosophy lurks somewhere beneath.

I ended Chapter One by saying that poetic language is language that acknowledges its own limitations, language that tries to express something even knowing it cannot be done. I borrow the phrase “ghost ribs” from poet Kay Ryan to describe the gesture poetic language makes, a gesture at something beyond itself, a sort of referencing of its own imperfections. The *Phaedrus* contains many such ghost ribs, most notably in that it contains an infamous critique of writing even though it is itself a written text. Socrates’ criticisms of the written word are a major point of Plato scholarship and are often taken as representative of Plato’s own beliefs. I do not propose to take Socrates’ criticisms as Plato’s own—in fact, I want to explore the tension generated by a text so carefully and complexly written that contains a withering critique of writing. Jan Zwicky describes how the *Phaedrus* coheres as a “torqued unity.” Let us try to see this torqued unity and to relate it to *erōs*, after which we will be in a position to understand how the lyric poets contribute.

Let us take Socrates' major objections to writing as he presents them in the *Phaedrus*.<sup>14</sup>

**Objection 1:** writing can only *remind* us of something we already know, and we therefore weaken our powers of memory by relying on it. Because it only reminds us, we cannot actually acquire knowledge from writing.<sup>15</sup>

**Objection 2:** writing cannot respond to questions and criticisms, it is defenseless unless its “parent” (i.e., author) comes to its rescue.<sup>16</sup>

**Objection 3:** writing, unlike the spoken word, cannot select its audiences, cannot discern appropriate and inappropriate targets for itself.<sup>17</sup>

**Objection 4:** writing is the mere image of speech, a dead and fossilized discourse as opposed to the living and moving spoken word. Any wisdom gained from writing is only appearance, a “dream-image” and not “waking reality.”<sup>18</sup>

The obvious question is whether or not these criticisms apply to the *Phaedrus* itself. One scholarly camp holds that Plato explicitly acknowledges the flaws and limitations of his

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<sup>14</sup> I would add to this list a fifth major objection, that writing makes us reliant on external, alien markings and thus inhibits self-knowledge (*Phr.* 275a). This point connects to the much larger theme of the self and is beyond my scope here. However I return to it later in the dissertation in a discussion of the myth of Theuth.

<sup>15</sup> *Phr.* 275b, 275d, 276c, 277e.

<sup>16</sup> *Phr.* 275d–e, 276c.

<sup>17</sup> *Phr.* 275e.

<sup>18</sup> *Phr.* 275d, 277d–278a.

own writing and points us toward the superior, oral dialectic.<sup>19</sup> Some even take this as evidence to support the unwritten doctrines view of Plato.<sup>20</sup> Another camp holds that the critique is not meant to apply to *Plato's* writings because they are such a unique hybrid, crafted to avoid Socrates' objections.<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that for all his mentions of epic, lyric, and tragic poetry, Plato nowhere references his own genre of dramatic dialogue, which was a well-established genre in his time (*sokratikoi logoi*).<sup>22</sup> I want to show how such withering attacks on writing in a written text present us with a tension, and I want to show how this tension is erotic. For the moment, let me say that I agree with the second camp of scholars who think that the *Phaedrus* escapes Socrates' criticisms.

**Objection 1:** *“the Phaedrus only reminds us of what we already know and thus weakens our powers of memory. And because it only reminds us, writing can't actually giving us any true knowledge.”* It is unclear of what exactly the *Phaedrus* might be said to remind us. In fact, it is such an unusual text, even among the Platonic dialogues, that I am not sure anyone reads the *Phaedrus* and is reminded of something they already knew. All manner of ideas and insights arise from a careful reading of the text that, at least speaking personally, never occurred to *me* before reading.

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<sup>19</sup> This view is old. See, for example, Thompson 1868: xxii: “[writing] was not the attainment on which Plato most prided himself, or which he most admired in others. He wore it ‘lightly like a flower,’ esteeming [it]...as dust in the balance when weighed against philosophic insight and dialectical subtlety.” This view would also, I believe, include De Vries 1969, Hackforth 1952, Morgan 2000, Rowe 1986 and 1994 and 2000, Rutherford 1995, and Ferrarri 1987.

<sup>20</sup> See the pieces collected in Nikulin 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Proponents here might include Kahn 2003, Nicholson 1999, Tarrant 1996, Nails 1995, Griswold 1986, Burger 1980, and Sinaiko 1965.

<sup>22</sup> Havelock 1963.

Further, the *Phaedrus* does not offer up some list of doctrinal positions like a cheat sheet before a debate. Instead it depicts the act of philosophizing dramatically. The *Phaedrus* tries to get us to see how a person can move through the world in a certain philosophical way. The details are not elaborated in a “how to” manual, and we are left with an artistic representation that we must make sense of—and that’s the key to rebuffing this objection: *we must make sense* of things, the text *shows* but does not *tell*. Let me discuss two ways in which the *Phaedrus* shows.

First, the *Phaedrus* depicts the philosophy via the dramatic staging of the dialogue. Unlike nearly every other Platonic dialogue, the *Phaedrus* spends a remarkable amount of time describing the scenery and background of the dialogue, not only at the beginning of the text but returning to it throughout out (e.g., the famous interlude of the cicadas). When Socrates and Phaedrus first encounter one another, Phaedrus remarks that Socrates is quite out of place (*atopos*) outside the city walls among nature: “You’re a wonder—you seem totally out of place [*atopōtatōs*]. You really do seem like a foreigner being led about and not like a local.”<sup>23</sup> Socrates seldom ventures outside the urban setting: “See, I love learning, and the trees won’t teach me anything, but the folks in the city do.”<sup>24</sup> It would seem that Socrates is skeptical about the possibility of learning from the natural world, but when Phaedrus asks him about the myth of Boreas, Socrates declines to participate in the new, rationalistic way of discussing myths:

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<sup>23</sup> *Phr.* 230c: σὺ δέ γε, ὦ θαυμάσιε, ἀτοπώτατός τις φαίνη. ἀτεχνῶς γάρ, ὃ λέγεις, ξεναγούμενω τινὶ καὶ οὐκ ἐπιχωρίῳ ἔοικας.

<sup>24</sup> *Phr.* 230d: φιλομαθῆς γάρ εἰμι: τὰ μὲν οὖν χωρία καὶ τὰ δένδρα οὐδέν μ’ ἐθέλει διδάσκειν, οἳ δ’ ἐν τῷ ἄστει ἄνθρωποι.

εἰ ἀπιστοίην, ὥσπερ οἱ σοφοί, οὐκ ἂν ἄτοπος εἶην, εἶτα σοφίζόμενος φαίην αὐτὴν πνεῦμα Βορέου κατὰ τῶν πλησίον πετρῶν σὺν Φαρμακείᾳ παίζουσαν ὥσαι...ἐμοὶ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὰ οὐδαμῶς ἐστὶ σχολή: τὸ δὲ αἴτιον, ὦ φίλε, τούτου τόδε. οὐ δύναμαί πω κατὰ τὸ Δελφικὸν γράμμα γνῶναι ἑμαυτόν<sup>25</sup>

If I disbelieved like the sophists, I wouldn't be out of place. I might then give some rational explanation—that a gust of wind from the north pushed her off those rocks while she played with Pharmaceia...But I don't have time for [these rationalizing explanations], and the reason, friend, is this: I do not yet, as the Delphic inscription reads, know myself.

Later in the dialogue, Socrates also disparages the trendy rationalizing manner in which people discuss prophecy and divine inspiration.<sup>26</sup> And even later, he chides Phaedrus for claiming to be a lover of the Muses without knowing the myth of the cicadas.<sup>27</sup> Socrates recites his palinode *because he heeds* the voice of his *daimonion*, which further shows his receptivity to non-human sources. Most tellingly, Socrates' passionate ode to Erōs is delivered in a state of madness brought on by the divine setting (*theion topon*).<sup>28</sup>

Socrates *does* see the natural and non-human world as a source of value and knowledge despite what he says about being a stranger there. He knows the landscape quite well and attunes himself to the divinely inspiring scenery in a way that directly affects his behavior (e.g., speaking in dithyrambs). A lurking theme in the *Phaedrus* is the ability or inability to listen, to attend to the natural world, to divinities, and to other humans. Poetic philosophy and gestalt theory try to get us to attend to texts and wholes as they are, without analyzing and manipulating them. The *Phaedrus* depicts this

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<sup>25</sup> *Phr.* 229c–e.

<sup>26</sup> *Phr.* 244c–d.

<sup>27</sup> *Phr.* 259b.

<sup>28</sup> *Phr.* 279b.

phenomenon in the figure of Socrates, who tries to get Phaedrus to attend to the world and its myths as they are, to learn from what is around him without distortion from trendy intellectualism. So the *Phaedrus* in its dramatic setting *shows* us what it would be like to cultivate sensitive vision to the world. This is not a mere reminder of anything.

A second way the *Phaedrus* shows us philosophy rather than just reminding us of something is with dialectic.<sup>29</sup> Dialectic, a term perhaps coined by Plato, comes from *dialegesthai* (“converse, talk with”), which explains why Socrates, the poster boy for dialectic, likes to talk but not why dialectic is associated with a method of collection and division. For that we need to note how *dialegesthai* is a reflexive middle-voice form of *dialegein* (“pick, choose”), a compound of *dia* and *legein* (“reckon, count, choose, tell, speak”), the latter of which relates of course to *logos* (“word, speech, discourse, reason, story”). Further, *dia* (“through”) comes from *dis* (“twice”) and originally meant “divided down the middle.” So dialectic is an account or a story that divides itself down the middle, a *logos* that cuts itself into pieces.<sup>30</sup>

Socrates upholds dialectic as a method of acquiring knowledge, but the *Phaedrus* does more than just mention this, more than just remind us of the fact. The *Phaedrus* shows Socrates engage in dialectic with Phaedrus *and* the form of the dialogue itself demonstrates dialectic. Scholars often divide the text into two halves, the first on love and the second dealing with the duller discussion of rhetoric and dialectic. Even this diptych

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<sup>29</sup> My remarks here are quite curtailed considering the prevalence of dialectic in Plato scholarship generally. I agree with Griswold 1982 in that the importance of dialectic to Plato’s philosophy has been overestimated and occupies an oversized place in the literature.

<sup>30</sup> Klein 1966, s.v.

structure can be seen as the text dividing itself in two. Socrates' final speech on love requires a discussion of souls and truth, and that discussion requires a method for finding truth. Dialectic thus responds to the needs of the first half of the dialogue even as its topical shift seemingly bifurcates the text. The two halves of the *Phaedrus* relate in that first half necessitates the second half which, in turn, verifies the truth of the first half—this is the underlying commonality amongst the apparent division. So the text on a formal level demonstrates dialectic.

**Objection 2:** *"the written Phaedrus cannot respond to questions and criticisms, and it is defenseless without its 'parent' to come to its rescue."* Consider how the text raises and grapples with possible objections to its own theses. For example, the speeches of Lysias and Socrates on rational, dispassionate love are counterbalanced by Socrates' divinely inspired palinode on love. In turn, the seeming triumph of that palinode and its treatment of the soul is met with a counterclaim when Socrates admits that only a god could be truly wise and that the best a mortal can do when speaking about the soul is to give an approximation.<sup>31</sup> And of course, consider the way the written text itself is a response to Socrates' criticisms of writing.

**Objection 3:** *"the written Phaedrus, unlike the spoken word, cannot select its audiences, cannot discern appropriate targets."* Let us take this criticism at face value and turn to Socrates himself. Does Socrates choose his audience any more wisely for having only spoken rather than written? Hardly. He famously dialogues with just about anyone who crosses his path, and indeed, this lack of discernment is partly what gets him into trouble with the state of

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<sup>31</sup> *Phr.* 246a.

Athens. Phaedrus is Socrates' audience in this text so let us consider their relationship.

Start with the opening lines of the *Phaedrus*.<sup>32</sup>

Socrates: My dear Phaedrus! Where are you going? And where are you coming from?

Phaedrus: Socrates! I'm coming from Lysias, son of Cephalus. I'm just going for a walk outside the walls because I spent all morning sitting with him, and our mutual friend Acumenus says that walking on the roads is less tiring than in the city streets.

Socrates: That's certainly true, my friend. So Lysias was in the city?

Phaedrus: Yeah, at Epicrates' house, the one that Morychus used to own near the temple to Olympian Zeus.

We cannot carelessly disregard this as meaningless preamble.<sup>33</sup> Lysias is a famous sophistic speech-writer of great technical powers (Phaedrus calls him “the greatest writer of our day”).<sup>34</sup> Lysias' rationalized and decidedly *non-erotic* speech is exactly what Socrates refutes when he delivers his palinode, and it is also exactly the mindset that, Nussbaum argues, Plato is refuting overall—a viewpoint of dispassionate and calculating self-cultivation, insulated from fragile human nature. Historically speaking, the Thirty Tyrants installed in Athens after its defeat in the Peloponnesian War executed Lysias' brother and expropriated Lysias.

Lysias' father Cephalus makes an appearance in the *Republic* Book I, a ghostly old man in whose palatial house the dialogue takes place. Cephalus spends a little time talking with Socrates about his thoughts in old age, specifically wondering about whether or not traditional tales of the afterlife are just lies. In place of these stories told by the cultural

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<sup>32</sup> *Phr.* 227a–b.

<sup>33</sup> For biographic information on the following figures, see Pauly-Wissowa 1980.

<sup>34</sup> *Phr.* 288a: δεινότατος ὢν τῶν νῦν γράφειν



guardians the poets, Cephalus worries about setting his business and financial affairs in order.

The trendy young intellectual scene of Athens at this time also features followers of the “better living” fad, the health nuts and “back to nature” advocates. Acumenus and his son Eryximachus (who has a starring role as the dullest speaker in the *Symposium*) are key members of this group, and Eryximachus is actually Phaedrus’ slightly older lover. Eryximachus, to give an example of this trend, is just barely prevented from speechifying on the wicked effects of alcohol at the start of the *Symposium*. Then we have Epicrates, the owner of the house where Lysias is staying, whom Aristophanes characterizes as a “rhetorician and demagogue” and who was more than once convicted of financial impropriety and treason, charges that eventually saw him executed.<sup>35</sup> Morychus had a reputation for debauchery and iniquity, and the Pauly-Wissowa encyclopedia of classical scholarship merely describes him as follows: “Tragedian, undoubtedly of the lowest rank, whose principal interests were culinary pleasures.”<sup>36</sup>

So in these few opening lines, as Josef Pieper phrases it, “Plato evokes the atmosphere...of sophisticated irreverence and detachment, of enlightened health doctrines and simultaneous depravity. And in the midst of these poisonous fumes, strangely untouched but gravely imperiled, we find Phaedrus!”<sup>37</sup> Socrates is trying to save Phaedrus, and Plato goes to great allusive lengths to set the scene for such salvation. In the

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<sup>35</sup> Aristophanes, *Ekklesiastousai* 68–72 and Pauly-Wissowa 1980, s.v.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Pieper 1964, 7.

drama of the text, Socrates has quite discerningly chosen his audience. But what matters for the critique of writing is that Socrates fails to convert Phaedrus to the life of true philosophy by the end of the dialogue. And in fact, Phaedrus, in the aftermath of the dramatic events of the *Symposium*, ends up executed by the state. So too does Alcibiades, perhaps the most disappointing of all Socrates' followers—the one who got away. And, most grimly of all, Socrates' spoken speeches fail to convince a jury of his innocence and he himself is also executed. The spoken word does not have a good track record as far as selecting audiences goes.

Considering that spoken discourse is supposed to be able to carefully discern its audience and tailor itself to them, we might expect Socrates' spoken words to have been more successful. Instead, many of the dialogues end without convincing anybody of anything, and Socrates' words let down not only himself but also his two most beloved students, a failure made final by the eventual executions of all three. At the very least, then, the written word does not seem to be any *worse* than the spoken word. Socrates' critique of writing here is rather toothless.

Beyond these characters, we might also consider that someone uninterested in philosophy probably would not read the *Phaedrus* with much attention anyway. The text is not especially funny, and despite its treatments of erotic love, there are no erotic or pornographic jokes—the closest we find is the joke about Phaedrus hiding “something” under his cloak (spoiler: it's a speech). A text as complex and demanding as the *Phaedrus* does in a sense pick its own audience, certainly more selectively than Socrates spoke.

**Objection 4:** “*writing is the mere image of speech, a dead and fossilized discourse as opposed to the living and moving spoken word. Any wisdom gained from writing is only appearance, a dream-image and not waking reality.*” This objection has similarities with Socrates’ attack on poetry from the *Republic* Book X. There, he describes poets as thrice-removed from truth. For example, the *idea* of a chair exists above and beyond any actual instances of a chair crafted by a carpenter, and an artist who *paints* a chair is even further removed than is that wooden chair from the idea of a chair. Similarly, poets only *depict* virtuous actions, copies of actions which are themselves only imperfect instantiations of ideals.

When applied in the context of writing and the *Phaedrus*, the question seems to be asking something like this: *is this written text an unfaithful rendering of its author’s thoughts?* It is not clear to me why living speech should represent a person’s thoughts any more honestly than written speech, and Socrates does not provide an answer to this exact question, instead relying on an assumption that writing just *is* inferior to speaking.<sup>38</sup> But what can speaking do that writing can’t, at least in the given context of Socrates? Remember that Socrates’ spoken *logos* proves ineffective at (1) getting answers, (2) converting his interlocutors to philosophy, and (3) defending himself. Again we are forced to admit that if *spoken* words cannot do any of this either, then it’s a pretty unimpressive criticism to make of *written* words.

In speaking of writing as a dead discourse, Socrates does allow for the possibility of a writing that is more than just external marks, that is actually internalized. *Phaedrus*

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<sup>38</sup> Part of this assumption undoubtedly comes from the historical period, when oral culture that had dominated for millennia was just starting to give way to written culture. See Havelock 1963.

describes it thus: “You’re talking about the living [ζῶντα] and ensouled [εἴψυκλον] discourse [λογον] of the one who knows...”<sup>39</sup> So there is a possibility for writing that is alive and not dead and such writing is “written in the soul” (*graphomenois en psukhēi*).<sup>40</sup> What would it mean for writing to be ensouled?

At root here is a question about how we recognize meaning. I interpret ensouled writing to be writing that moves us in the way a soul moves a living thing. If the notion of a soul sits uneasy with modern sensibilities, we should keep in mind that *psukhē* in this context lacks the theological associations we might give it. *Phukhē* can reasonably be understood as “life” or even “breath” in Homeric contexts. *Empsukhon logon* (“ensouled writing”) is just living writing the way an animal is living compared to a rock—it moves. Writing that moves is writing that resonates, and perceiving resonance is the experience of meaning according to poetic philosophy. So recognizing *empsukhon logon* is a question of how we recognize meaning. I think we do so by attending to things around us and seeing how our own souls respond. Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* describes the experience of meaning as follows:<sup>41</sup>

§455. We want to say: “When we mean something, it’s like going up to someone, it’s not having a dead picture (of any kind).” We go up to the thing we mean.

§456. “When one means something, it is oneself meaning”; so one is oneself in motion. One is rushing ahead and so cannot also observe oneself rushing ahead.

§457. Yes: meaning something is like going up to someone.

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<sup>39</sup> *Phr.* 276a: τὸν τοῦ εἰδότος λόγον λέγεις ζῶντα καὶ ἔμψυκλον, οὗ ὁ γεγραμμένος εἶδωλον ἂν τι λέγοιτο δικαίως.

<sup>40</sup> *Phr.* 278.

<sup>41</sup> Wittgenstein 1953.

The experience of meaning is the experience of being addressed and of responding. Wittgenstein's remarks even resonate with the *Phaedrus* when he states that meaning is “not having a dead picture”—that is, meaning is a sort of vividness. Often, a thing is meaningless to us until we reorient ourselves, until we shift perspective or notice some detail *just so*, at which point we understand and finally grasp meaning. To have such a gestalt shift we must attune ourselves, pay attention in such a way as to experience resonance. Recall how Socrates' through his own actions illustrates what it would be like to open oneself to the setting around oneself.

Does the *Phaedrus* address us in a way that feels meaningful, and if so, how? We might read the text and disagree with every proposition we encounter, thinking Plato laughably wrong or finding him irritating, but this is beside the point. The issue is whether or not the *Phaedrus* in any way stimulates thought, compels us as human beings interested in beauty and love and how to live. If it provokes some response, then perhaps we can say that this written text is ensouled, that it comes up to us, in Wittgenstein's words. In the language of poetic philosophy, resonance in one form evokes resonance in another form.

#### **§4, *Logos Erōtikos***

So the *Phaedrus* escapes Socrates' critique of writing, and it may even be *empsychon logon* despite being a written text. How does this make it erotic? If I may be allowed a brief biographical conceit... As a young man, Plato was well on his way to a career as a tragic poet, having secured a wealthy patron and earned a spot in the great City Dionysia. Tradition holds that on his way to the theater, Plato encountered Socrates holding court in the agora. So struck was the young Plato by this shabby fellow that he burned his

poetry and determined to follow Socrates down the path of philosophy. Plato's conversion to philosophy stuck, but it is clear that he never gave up creative writing. He may have left behind tragic poetry, but he dove into a new form of drama and used it, mostly, to leave us one of the clearest and most inspiring depictions in literary history—that of his teacher Socrates. Part of the torqued unity of the *Phaedrus* comes from this tension between Socrates and Plato, between spoken and written *logos*, between the philosopher and the poet. The *Phaedrus* is Plato's attempt to sort out his own love affair between poetry and philosophy.

We can imagine a young Plato determined to give himself to philosophy yet unable to abandon writing. He knew firsthand the power of dialoguing with Socrates, and so he needed a form of writing that captured that same vibrancy, the same transformative potential. Dialectical conversation is what Socrates practiced, so Plato tried to write dialectically. But dialectic requires Plato to incorporate and grapple with opposing views, and in the case of Plato's poetic writing, the strongest possible opposing view would have been none other than Socrates. Unfortunately, his beloved teacher was dead, and so Plato was left trying to recreate a conversation with a ghost. The *Phaedrus* is a dialogue with the dead.

The test for *empsychon logon* and for meaning in general is in how we respond to thing, whether or not we feel addressed by someone determines our own response. One bell sets another bell moving with reverberations. I want to consider the *Phaedrus* as addressed to Socrates, a love letter or sorts. Virginia Woolf says that those who write letters “instinctively draw a sketch of the person to whom the letter is addressed...without

someone warm and breathing on the other side of the page, letters are worthless.”<sup>42</sup>

Woolf’s idea touches on themes vital to both the *Phaedrus* and to poetic philosophy.

Modern professional philosophy certainly does not subscribe to Woolf’s idea and in fact actively strives against it. Consider the following description by philosopher Christopher Hamilton:

...in general, those who write academic philosophy seek to write in an impersonal manner as if they were not individuals with specific concerns. They seek to write in an impersonal voice of reason or pure intellect, that is, a voice which is no particular person’s voice. Raymond Gaita has put this by suggesting that the mainstream philosopher thinks of himself as a *res cogitans*, a mere thinking thing, and for such a philosophy ‘to think philosophically is determined by an idealisation of thinking as such, thinking abstracted from the form which life takes for any thinking thing’. This approach is, indeed, recognised within the subject, and philosophers pride themselves on it: it is supposed that the glory and power of the subject lie in such an approach, since it is thought that it frees the writer from personal prejudice... Truth, it is supposed, is revealed to an eye which is untainted by any personal concerns and is revealed in a voice which is no particular person’s voice. It is revealed by rational reflection which is fair to all competing views of the world and thus arrives at the one true account.<sup>43</sup>

Philosophy sees dispassionate analysis as an ideal because, as Hamilton and Gaita claim, objectivity is taken to be the default mode through which we arrive at truth. Why should this be the case? Why should we suppose that a thing is not true if it comes from a more personal, perspectival place?<sup>44</sup> Philosophy takes as its ideal model an author who addresses only the pure rational intellect of an audience. It aims at a subject-less, perspective-less form. But there is no such thing as style-less form. Analytic philosophy

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<sup>42</sup> Woolf 1938, 5, as seen in Zwicky 2015, 79.

<sup>43</sup> Hamilton 2001, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Nussbaum phrases the issue thus: “Our Anglo-American philosophical tradition [what I call modern professional philosophy] has tended to assume that the ethical text should, in the process of enquiry, converse with the intellect alone; it should not make its appeal to the emotions, feelings, and sensory responses. Plato explicitly argues that ethical learning must proceed by separating the intellect from our other merely human parts; many other writers proceed on this assumption...” (Nussbaum 1986, 15).

aims at a transparent style, but this is like trying to design a building without any style. Simply by existing the building has style—it may be ugly or dull, but it has style. Further, all human writing comes from a subjective and contextualized place. I do not deny the existence of objective meaning (in fact it is a major part of poetic philosophy—more on this in the next chapter), but I do deny that pure objectivity or a God’s eye view is available to imperfect mortals like ourselves.<sup>45</sup>

I think that Plato manages to write so powerfully precisely by *not* writing like a modern professional philosopher, by writing instead like someone writing a love letter. Resonance evokes resonance—this is the experience of meaning. The nondescript strip malls of suburbia have a form, have style, but it is a lifeless style that never stops us breathless, never strikes us as meaningful. The same goes for the language of an instruction manual or newspaper. Not all written philosophy has to be addressed to a loved one certainly. Plato writes to the dead Socrates, and Zwicky points out how Wittgenstein very much writes to himself. The point I take from Woolf is that the addressee must be a distinct persona in the mind of the writer. Ensouled writing is ensouled only insofar as it proceeds from a particular person, through imaginative gestures, to another particular person who gives a damn about the writing.

To break that down: first, there must be a writer who cares about something. Caring about something, wanting to express something, is not necessarily the same as having an articulate argumentative position or systematic doctrine to teach. Second, this

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<sup>45</sup> A thrilling discussion of these issues is Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy as Poetry*. Rorty does, I think, have a very orthodox reading of Plato, but his criticisms of Plato and of an Archimedean Point are precisely those I am making of modern professional philosophy and analytic style. See Rorty 2016.



writer must use imaginative gestures to try and address another person. In this sense, imagination should not be understood as the fanciful invention of things but rather as the thoughtful attempt to craft an image in one's mind that corresponds to how the addressee *really is*. In other words, imagination is actually the faculty by which we try to see what's *really there* (I discuss this point in-depth in Chapter Three). We cannot address a particular person unless we *attend* to them, unless we *imagine* their concerns and preferences and flaws and so on. A love letter's power correlates with its intimacy, with the degree of true perception the writer is able to display towards the addressee—and this requires attention. Third, the writer labors at least partly under the assumption that the addressee gives a damn, that the concerns and thoughts of the writer will in some way be shared by the addressee, that the addressee will make the effort to pay attention in turn. In Wittgenstein's terms, we go up to someone in the hopes that they will respond to us with recognition.

All writing is addressed to someone. Maybe it's a specific individual as in the case of a love letter, or maybe it's a specific audience like a conference paper aimed at one's colleagues. Even an entry in a diary has an addressee, be it one's own self or one's children or whatever. In this sense, I do not deny that modern professional philosophy in, say, an academic journal, has an imagined audience. It does. But I do think that people can pay more or less attention to their addressee. Similarly, no building is designed without people in mind. That would make no sense. Buildings are only designed for people to live in, pass through, or even look at in the case of some monuments. But just because all buildings presuppose an audience does not mean equal attention goes into the

building's style or its impact on that audience. The same goes for writing. The analytic style of modern professional philosophy is the suburban strip mall of written form.

Iris Murdoch claims that the motivation behind attention is love.<sup>46</sup> To really attend to another human being in all their messiness and virtue and weakness, with all their desires and hopes is a difficult thing. “It is a *task* to come to see the world as it is,” Murdoch writes.<sup>47</sup> So too trying to perceive another person as she or he truly is. This is why addressing writing to someone, at its best, is an act of love, and in so doing, the writer enlivens a text that will elicit a response from the reader. This is what I mean in saying that the *Phaedrus* is a love letter. Another way of phrasing it is that living writing, *empsychon logon*, is erotic writing, *logos erotikos*. Halperin calls this an “erotics of narrativity,” arguing that Plato writes in a way that reflects the nature of *erōs*. The dialogues may never settle on fixed answers, but they do certainly leave us wanting more, which is precisely how desire works—as long as it is desire, it is unsatisfied.<sup>48</sup> As Zwicky phrases it, “[t]he image of the auditor calls the gesture from us, and with it, we call to the auditor. This is how—and why—some words stay alive long after their original utterer is dead: they are infused with the movement of address.”<sup>49</sup> As I said, eros is shifting, ceaselessly moving, and so *logos erotikos* is also moving, which is why we can call it *empsychon logon*, enlivened or ensouled writing.



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<sup>46</sup> I discuss this in more detail in Chapter Three.

<sup>47</sup> Murdoch 1992, 91. Her italics.

<sup>48</sup> The definitive treatment of desire as that which always lacks and wants more is Carson 1986.

<sup>49</sup> Zwicky 2015, 81.

So the *Phaedrus* is a love letter, erotic writing, because it is ensouled. The experience of *erōs* is one of profound tension, and in the *Phaedrus* at least, the good life is not to be found in transcending or escaping these tensions. Simply put, *erōs* is characterized by tension, and the *Phaedrus* is erotic writing (because it is ensouled)—therefore, the *Phaedrus* is characterized by tensions. My goal now is to show how Plato uses the figures of Stesichorus and Sappho to depict some of these tensions.

Andrea Nightingale, in her excellent study of genre in the dialogues, writes that the *Phaedrus* “abandons the notion that traditional genres of poetry and rhetoric are inherently ‘unphilosophical.’”<sup>50</sup> She says:

It is precisely by leaving the genre of lyric poetry—with its discourse of madness, invasion, and the destruction of the boundaries of the psyche—more or less intact that Plato is able to create one of the most extraordinary paradoxes in his entire corpus: the notion that reason and madness, at a certain level, converge.<sup>51</sup>

Three points here. First, lyric is the natural discourse for discussing the instability and destruction of what Nightingale calls “the psyche.” We could substitute “self” or any number of terms for “psyche,” but my point is the same either way—human experience of the world and of ourselves is often porous and opaque. Second, madness is not one half of a dichotomy to be overcome but rather exists in productive tension with reason. Third, Nightingale closes her discussion by claiming that although Plato incorporates rhetoric and lyric into his dialogue, he “does not offer a definition or even a description of philosophic discourse.”<sup>52</sup> The best we can do, she thinks, is try and identify how Plato

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<sup>50</sup> Nightingale 1995, 113.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>52</sup> Nightingale 1995, 166.

feels about different discourses at different times. I think we can do better—we can look at the form of the *Phaedrus* itself and ask what it might reveal about philosophy. If Plato incorporates lyric poetry, then in what sense might philosophy be lyric or poetic? And what about human experience makes poetic language so important? The remainder of this chapter is given over to showing how, through Stesichorus and Sappho, the *Phaedrus* defies typical characterizations of Plato as advocating transcendence beyond messy human tensions.

### §5, Stesichorus

Socrates begins his palinode by backtracking. “This story is not true,” he says.<sup>53</sup> He’s talking about his first speech, which argued that love (along with poetry) is intrinsically bad because it is a species of irrational madness. The palinode redeems love and poetry (along with divination and purification), redeems madness itself, provided certain conditions are met (the madness be divine, the true love be directed towards a particular lover of good quality, etc.).

We know that Plato was aware of Stesichorus because he quotes him, but what do we know about Stesichorus that can help contextualize Plato’s allusions?<sup>54</sup> Stesichorus has largely been ignored in Plato scholarship with the exception of an excellent study by Andrea Capra on which I draw.<sup>55</sup> In fact, lyric poetry as a genre has been mostly overlooked in Plato scholarship, which instead focuses on Plato’s relation to epic and

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<sup>53</sup> *Phr.* 243a: οὐκ ἔστ’ ἔτυμος λόγος οὗτος.

<sup>54</sup> The following discussion takes its information on Stesichorus largely from Finglass and Kelly 2015, Robbins 2013, and Ercoles 2013. The argument itself is indebted to Capra 2014, with whom I am in large agreement but whose focus differs from my own.

<sup>55</sup> Capra 2014.

tragedy. There are, I think, unique features of lyric that Plato draws on and that, because they have been overlooked, have failed to inform readings of the *Phaedrus*.

Stesichorus influenced all poetic tradition after him (comedy, tragedy, lyric), and he used the preceding epic tradition in a way few other poets did.<sup>56</sup> His poems often featured in the high sympotic culture of classical Athens, and his work exhibits traces of the Dorian dialect from Syracuse in Italy, which suggests Sicilian editions and versions of his work.<sup>57</sup> Syracuse was home to Dionysius I, the tyrant for whom Plato traveled to Syracuse, a disastrous visit that, as Nussbaum suggests, nevertheless saw Plato fall in love with Dionysius. Writing in the sixth century B.C.E., Stesichorus lived in a time of transition and tensions. The sixth century saw the rise of the *polis* and massive “economic prosperity and expansive trade relations which led to familiarity with distant cities and their luxury goods.”<sup>58</sup> According to Gregory Nagy, in this age we find the flourishing of Panhellenism, an increased sense of shared culture, myth, history, identity, and so on over and against the local regional and *polis*-focused culture.<sup>59</sup> In contrast to the Panhellenic, Nagy proposes the “epichoric,” which deals with myths and rituals and literature produced in local settings. The epichoric depends on context and local dialect that for one reason or another did not attain recognition and use across wide swaths of the Greek cultural sphere. Epic poetry, with its artificial blend of Aeolic and Dorian dialects, anachronistic vocabulary, and distinctive dactylic hexameter had a unifying function in

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<sup>56</sup> Krummen 2009.

<sup>57</sup> Ercoles 2013, 576ff.

<sup>58</sup> Krummen 2009, 189.

<sup>59</sup> Nagy 1990.

early Greece.<sup>60</sup> Lyric, in contrast, was more often composed in local dialects, referred to gods and heroes by regional names, and adopted a dizzying variety of meters. Lyric was more occasional than epic in that it was composed for specific events—weddings, festivals, symposia, funerals, victories, etc.<sup>61</sup> This tension between the epichoric and the Panhellenic, between the lyric and the epic, between the *polis* and Greater Hellas represents a tension between the particular and the general that threads its way through the *Phaedrus* as a whole.<sup>62</sup>

Another speculative link between Plato and Stesichorus is Pythagoreanism. The Pythagorean Archytas of Taras, a friend and possible tutor to Plato, helped the latter escape from Syracuse. Leaving aside the philosophical influences of Pythagoreanism on Plato, the Pythagorean tradition of Plato's time had branched into literary criticism, helping to popularize a particular method of reading Homer that involved rehabilitating blood-soaked heroes into something more morally acceptable to the classical period.<sup>63</sup> These later Pythagoreans seized on Stesichorus as a model for rehabilitating Homer because of his famous poem on Helen. As the *Phaedrus* tells us:

ἔστιν δὲ τοῖς ἀμαρτάνουσι περὶ μυθολογίαν καθαρμὸς ἀρχαῖος, ὃν Ὅμηρος μὲν οὐκ ἤσθετο, Στησίχορος δέ. τῶν γὰρ ὀμμάτων στερηθεὶς διὰ τὴν Ἑλένης κακηγορίαν οὐκ ἠγγόησεν ὥσπερ Ὅμηρος, ἀλλ' ἄτε μουσικὸς ὢν ἔγνω τὴν αἰτίαν, καὶ ποιεῖ εὐθὺς — οὐκ ἔστ' ἔτυμος λόγος οὗτος,

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<sup>60</sup> Carey 2009 and Griffith 2009.

<sup>61</sup> Griffith 2010.

<sup>62</sup> See West 2015 on the contrast between lyric and epic.

<sup>63</sup> Detienne 1962 on Pythagorean literary criticism. Guthrie 1975 helped to set the tone for the discussion of Pythagoras' influence on Plato when he wrote "how difficult it is to separate their [the Pythagoreans'] philosophy from Plato's" (35). However, Huffman 2013 points out the total absence of any discussion of Pythagoreanism and Platonism in scholarship since Guthrie. Hook 2013 is a notable exception, and is the first book-length study of the topic.

οὐδ' ἔβας ἐν νηυσὶν εὐσέλμοις  
οὐδ' ἴκεο Πέργαμα Τροίας<sup>64</sup>

In mythology there is an ancient purification, which Homer didn't know, but which Stesichoros did know. For when Stesichoros was struck blind for slandering Helen, he was not, like Homer, ignorant of why. Rather, being scholarly, he knew the cause, and straightaway wrote this poem:

This story is not true.  
You never stepped on the benched ships.  
You never came to the towers of Troy.

An alternative telling is recounted by Plato's contemporary, the theorist and teacher

Isocrates:

Looking to demonstrate her own power Helen made an object lesson of the poet Stesichorus. For the fact is he began his poem "Helen" with a bit of blasphemy. Then when he stood up he found he'd been robbed of his eyes. Straightaway realizing why, he composed the so-called "Palinode" and Helen restored him to his own nature.<sup>65</sup>

Stesichorus's revising of Homeric legend suited the revisionist purposes of the Pythagoreans, and so they in turn edited and manipulated Stesichorus' biography such that he became a mythic protégé to Helen herself. For a writer who appropriates and repurposes mythic and poetic tradition as much as Plato, Stesichorus' repurposing of Homer suggests a parallel. Aristotle reveals a similar appropriation of Stesichorus' biography when he discusses a popular tradition that describes the poet as an outspoken opponent of tyrants.<sup>66</sup> This aspect of Stesichorus' received personality may hold special significance for Plato given his experiences with tyranny in Syracuse. In fact, in a letter addressed to Dionysius I, Plato closes with a quotation from Stesichorus' *Palinode*, urging

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<sup>64</sup> *Phr.* 243a.

<sup>65</sup> Isocrates *Helen* 64. Anne Carson's translation in Carson 1998.

<sup>66</sup> Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1393b8ff.

the tyrant to reject his previous behavior as false and to turn to truth instead.<sup>67</sup> The *Phaedrus* itself references Stesichorus when Socrates describes his second speech as “an ancient purification” (*katharmos arkhaios*), a clear nod to Stesichorus’ *Palinode* as a purification as well as a reference to more ancient Pythagoreanism with its cultic practices of purification.<sup>68</sup>

So epic and lyric represent two streams of early Greek poetry: universal versus particular, Panhellenic versus epichoric, communal versus individual, and so on. Stesichorus, although a lyric poet, bridges these two realms both with his writing style and his engagement with epic themes and *topoi*, most famously Helen. Stesichorus wrote a poem disparaging Helen of Troy and was struck blind, but unlike Homer he recognized the cause and wrote an encomium, a worshipful defense, of Helen to make up for it. Stesichorus’ received biography was claimed both by traditions of Homeric revisionism and of anti-tyranny. Stesichorus influenced other genres and featured prominently in classical Athenian culture, and Plato would assuredly have been aware of him, further confirmed by Plato’s quotation of Stesichorus’ *Palinode* in a letter to Dionysius I. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates disparages Erōs and recites a palinode to avoid angering the love god, a palinode in which Socrates quotes Stesichorus’ *Palinode* (which only remains to us in fragments).



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<sup>67</sup> *Letter III* 319e.

<sup>68</sup> Riedweg 2013.



Socrates describes his palinode as purification himself with waters of discourse (*potimōi logōi*). The metaphor depicts *logos* as water. Reason (*logos*) is fluid, it ebbs and surges, it does not remain constant. Reason is not some eternal light but rather a concealing water. This makes sense, as Socrates does not deliver the palinode because he rationally determines his mistake but because the *daimonion* on his shoulder starts to nag—Socrates recants because he is divinely inspired or even compelled.<sup>69</sup> The tide of reason has receded in favor of sacred madness. By this point in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates has made mention of several sources of inspiration and will mention several more ahead, all of which I now list below.<sup>70</sup>

1. Lyric poets Sappho and Anacreon, and nameless prose writers (“...I certainly must have heard something from either the beautiful Sappho or wise Anacreon, or maybe from some prose writer [*suggrapheōn*]”<sup>71</sup>).
2. Muses (“So come, clear-voiced [*ligeiai*] Muses...grab hold of this tale [*muthos*] with me...”<sup>72</sup>).
3. The surrounding landscape (“...really, this place seems divine [*theios*], so don’t wonder at my becoming nympholeptic [*numpholēptos*] as my speech goes on...”<sup>73</sup>).

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<sup>69</sup> *Phr.* 242c.

<sup>70</sup> This list is taken and modified from Capra 2014.

<sup>71</sup> *Phr.* 235c.

<sup>72</sup> *Phr.* 237a.

<sup>73</sup> *Phr.* 238c.

4. Nymphs, the daughters of Pan and symbolic of frenzy, excess, and sexual frivolity (“I will be enthused [*enthusiasos*] by the Nymphs....”<sup>74</sup>).
5. Lyric poets Ibycus and Stesichorus (Ibycus is quoted first by Socrates: “‘I was distressed’ as Ibycus says ‘lest I buy honor among men by erring [*amblakōn*] against the gods”<sup>75</sup> and then comes the reference to Stesichorus’ blindness already discussed above<sup>76</sup>).
6. Muses again (“A third sort of mania and possession is from the Muses, it seizes a pure [*abaton*] and gentle [*hapalēn*] soul, whipping it into a Bacchic frenzy [*egeirousa kai ekbakkheuousa*]”<sup>77</sup>).
7. Cicadas (“...maybe, being pleased, they will give us the gift they got from the gods to give to men.”<sup>78</sup>).

This list presents an array of tensions between the local-particular (the landscape, the nameless logical divinities) and the general-universal (the famous lyric poets and the Muses).<sup>79</sup>

Most Plato scholarship, following in Nussbaum’s wake, reads the palinode as the divinely inspired recantation of Socrates’ first speech. However, the first two sources of inspiration on the above list (the lyric poets Sappho and Anacreon, and the Muses) are

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<sup>74</sup> *Phr.* 241d.

<sup>75</sup> *Phr.* 232d. (Ibycus *Fragment 24*.)

<sup>76</sup> *Phr.* 243a.

<sup>77</sup> *Phr.* 245a.

<sup>78</sup> *Phr.* 258e.

<sup>79</sup> *Phr.* 262cff.: “...one who knows the truth can lead his listeners with words, and I, Phaedrus, charge [*αἰτιῶμαι*] the local divinities [*τοὺς ἐντοπίους θεούς*] as being the cause...”

invoked *before* Socrates begins even his *first* speech. This means that *both* speeches might be inspired in some way. If both speeches are inspired, then we cannot conclude that irrational versus rational poetry is the distinguishing feature of the two speeches. Instead, I propose that Socrates' palinode supersedes his first speech because the palinode acknowledges human finitude. Let me explain.

Socrates is compelled to purify himself, something he shares in common with the four lyric poets mentioned as inspirational sources. The details of the poets' lives are, as always when dealing with archaic lyricists, sketchy, but "according to biographical tradition, three of them, namely Anacreon, Ibycus, and Stesichorus, recovered after being involved in some kind of "incident," and a similar story was probably circulated about Sappho."<sup>80</sup> The lyric poets, like Socrates, rehabilitated themselves, but unlike Socrates, the poets were eventually incorporated by Athens into political ideology in service of the state.<sup>81</sup> For example, Anacreon's traditional image was that of a debauched, gauche pretty boy from orientalized Ionia, but biographical tradition tampered with this picture so that Anacreon became "the image of a noble symposiast...a moderate *paiderastês*. By Plato's time, the Athenians had fully appropriated Anacreon, both as an idealized singer and virtuous lover. This explains why Plato's Anacreon is called "the wise one" and inspired Socrates' erotic speech..."<sup>82</sup> Similar appropriations of poetic figures by Athens apply to the other three poets.

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<sup>80</sup> Capra 2014, 54.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>82</sup> Capra 2014, 33. See Shapiro 2012 for Capra's source.

Ibycus and Stesichorus, like Socrates, both sensed the danger in offending the gods and recanted. They recognized the folly of placing fame among men above respect for the gods. I think this applies also to Socrates' refusal to de-mythologize the story of Boreas and Oreithueia—he recognizes the value in traditional myth. To rationalize it away is almost a form of sacrilege, a form of deafness to the meaning of the world and its traditions. It is important to recall that Socrates' unending quest for self-knowledge comes about because of the gods. In the *Apology* we learn that the Delphic Oracle's pronouncement of Socrates as the wisest of men is the inciting event in Socrates' philosophical life. Not quite believing the oracle, but also not wanting to naysay a god, Socrates decides to investigate further and speaks with politicians and poets.<sup>83</sup> He realizes that if he is wiser than other men it is in the sense that he, at least, recognizes that he does not know.<sup>84</sup> Socrates *interprets* Delphi when he concludes that “it is likely that the god is, in reality [*tōi ontī*], wise and that what his oracle means is that human wisdom [*hē anthrōpinē sophiā*] is of little or no value.”<sup>85</sup> Socrates, by recognizing the limits of human wisdom, becomes the spokesman for Delphi. He is on a mission from god.<sup>86</sup>

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates senses that he has transgressed, that he, like Ibycus and Stesichorus, has placed the human the divine. In Socrates' first speech (and in Lysias' before that) we see an anonymous non-lover trying to convince a younger boy to grant him sexual favors by explaining that this is safer than getting involved with a maddened

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<sup>83</sup> *Apology* 21a-24b.

<sup>84</sup> *Apology* 21d.

<sup>85</sup> *Apology* 23a.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Sallis 1996, chapter one.

lover. This first speech of Socrates is wrong not because it uses rhetoric *per se* nor because it lacks inspiration but because it misses the true nature of *erōs*. The Delphic Oracle commands “*know thyself*”, so self-knowledge is divine. For Socrates, self-knowledge is knowing that one does not know, knowing one’s limits. Knowing one’s limits is therefore divine. Against this, Socrates’ first speech praises reason, total self-control and knowledge (this is why Nussbaum sees it as representative of the orthodox Platonic tradition). Self-knowledge, knowledge of human limits, knowledge of imperfect human reason, knowledge of human openness to external forces—this is all absent from the speech. In rejecting the first speech, then, Socrates rejects an inaccurate picture of mortal powers. Human life is not ruled by unimpeachable reason. The non-lover of the first speech is a robot, a dispassionate calculator, and in this sense, the non-lover displays a severe lack of self-knowledge, a severe lack of human limits. This is why a palinode is needed—to paint a more accurate picture of human mortality, one that acknowledges human imperfection.

Stesichorus helps contextualize Socrates’ strangely performative behavior. Legend has it that Stesichorus lost his sight because he insulted Helen (who became a god in later tradition), and this blindness parallels Socrates’ own during his first speech, during which he covers his head. Before the palinode, Socrates removes his veil and regains his vision just as he regains figurative insight into the true nature of *erōs*.<sup>87</sup> According to David Sider, extant reports of Stesichorus’ live performances describe the poet standing at the end of his show, pretending to have been blinded. After this theatrical display, Stesichorus would

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<sup>87</sup> Cf. Demos 1999, 70.

perform the remainder of the poem and “recover” his vision. So the palinode of Stesichorus, like that of Socrates, is not just a recantation but a literal re-vision.<sup>88</sup>

Another oddly performative moment comes when Socrates asks, “Where is the youth with whom I was just speaking? He must also hear this, lest he accept a non-lover!”<sup>89</sup> Socrates feigns blindness after lying in the grass beside Phaedrus for quite some time already. We can imagine the theatricality with which Socrates might cry out, the frantic groping and warning against acquiescing to the scoundrel non-lover—all of this is vividly explicable once we read it through Stesichorus. And, instead of reading it only as a theatrical allusion to Stesichorus, we can also read it as a serious and loving expression of Socrates’ concern for Phaedrus, who is, as I mentioned, deeply endangered by his association with the trendy sophistic culture of the day.

Socrates’ veil is worth dwelling on a moment longer. He covers his head when he begins his first, impious speech:

ἐγκαλυψάμενος ἔρῳ, ἴν’ ὅτι τάχιστα διαδράμω τὸν λόγον καὶ μὴ βλέπων πρὸς σέ ὑπ’ αἰσχύνῃς διαπορώμαι...ἄγετε δὴ, ὦ Μοῦσαι, εἴτε δι’ ᾠδῆς εἶδος λίγειαί, εἴτε διὰ γένος μουσικὸν τὸ Λιγύων ταύτην ἔσχετ’ ἐπωνυμίαν, ζύμ μοι λάβεσθε τοῦ μύθου, ὃν με ἀναγκάζει ὁ βέλτιστος οὐτοσί λέγειν, ἴν’ ὁ ἑταῖρος αὐτοῦ, καὶ πρότερον δοκῶν τούτῳ σοφὸς εἶναι, νῦν ἔτι μᾶλλον δόξη.<sup>90</sup>

I’ll talk with my head covered so as to rush through the speech as quickly as possible and not trip myself up looking at you...So come, clear-voiced Muses (whether you got the name from the nature of your song or from the musical race of Ligurians), grab hold of this tale with me, the tale that this fine fellow here compels me to tell so that his friend who seemed wise to him before now will seem even wiser.

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<sup>88</sup> Sider 1989.

<sup>89</sup> *Phr.* 243e.

<sup>90</sup> *Phr.* 237a-b.

How are we to read this mysterious gesture in light of Stesichorus? “The gesture of veiling accompanies weeping, grief and mourning in Greek art and literature from the earliest periods onwards.”<sup>91</sup> Veiling is associated with shame (*aidōs*), and thus shields the veiled from the eyes and judgments of others. However, the veiling itself, the very act of concealment, signals one’s emotional state. Veiling thus protects the veiled and draws in the observer, eliciting sympathy or at least curiosity. Veiling’s significance in ritual mourning, notably funeral rites, connects it to that final transformation from life to death.<sup>92</sup> So Socrates hides his shame from Phaedrus while simultaneously drawing in the younger man, seducing him not through dispassionate logic but through unspoken, gestural veiling. Perhaps this first speech is not as rational and straightforward as it appears. And this seduction has transformative power.

Socrates explains to Phaedrus that his *daimonion* compels him to stay and recant. The verb used here is *aphosiōsōmai*, which might be translated broadly as “making expiation,” but also “purify from guilt or pollution,” “consecrate,” “satisfy one’s conscience,” “atone” and so on.<sup>93</sup> As Capra points out, Plutarch describes how poets, before singing a hymn, would “purify themselves [*aphosiōsamenoī*] to the gods as they desire...straightaway [*euthus*] moving to [the songs] of Homer and the other poets.”<sup>94</sup> Socrates follows suit, atoning and then straightaway (*euthus*) beginning his palinode. He also remarks that Stesichorus, being learned (*mousikos*), knew to immediately (*euthus*) sing a

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<sup>91</sup> Cairns 2009, 37.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> *Phr.* 242c. For the definitions of ἀφosiώσωμαι see *Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v.

<sup>94</sup> Pseudo Plutarch, *On Music* 1133b-c. Capra 2014, 41.

recantation—the palinode. Socrates then details the ways in which his palinode differs from Stesichorus’:

ἐγὼ οὖν σοφώτερος ἐκείνων γενήσομαι κατ’ αὐτό γε τοῦτο: πρὶν γάρ τι παθεῖν διὰ τὴν τοῦ Ἐρωτος κακηγορίαν πειράσομαι αὐτῷ ἀποδοῦναι τὴν παλινωδίαν, γυμνῆ τῆ κεφαλῆ καὶ οὐχ ὥσπερ τότε ὑπ’ αἰσχύνῃς ἐγκεκαλυμμένος...καὶ γάρ, ὦγαθὲ Φαῖδρε, ἐννοεῖς ὡς ἀναιδῶς εἴρησθον τῷ λόγῳ, οὗτός τε καὶ ὁ ἐκ τοῦ βιβλίου ῥηθείς.<sup>95</sup>

I, really, will be wiser than them [Homer and Stesichorus] this way: I’ll try to render my palinode before suffering anything from my slander of Erōs, my head bare and not covered out of shame like before...for consider, good Phaedrus, how shameless the speeches were, both this one [Socrates’ first speech] and the one you read from the scroll.

Socrates then addresses the imaginary beautiful boy whom he addressed in the first speech, this time warning him against the previous speech by beginning with the phrase “this story is not true.” This imaginary boy adds to the theatricality of Socrates’ performance, continuing his impersonation of singing poet. The impersonation is confirmed a few lines later when Socrates tells the imaginary boy that “this which I am about to speak is by Stesichorus, son of Euphemus of Himera.”<sup>96</sup> It is worth noting that Euphemus (*Euphēmou*) literally means “man of pious speech” (hence the English “euphemism”) and that Himera (*Himeraïou*) literally means “town of desire” (Nussbaum calls it “Passionville”). Stesichorus’ own name means something like “chorus setter.” These names hint at the themes to come in the palinode, but there is even more to them. The connection between love and divinity, between madness and godliness is strengthened in the figure of Stesichorus, a figure to whom we may compare Socrates,

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<sup>95</sup> *Phr.* 243b-c.

<sup>96</sup> *Phr.* 244a.



thus strengthening the link between madness and godliness, between love and divinity, between poetry and philosophy.

So far I have mostly discussed Socrates' words and actions in the brief lead-up to the palinode, and before getting to the palinode itself, I want to consider one more thing: some differences between Homer and Stesichorus. Unlike Homer (famously blind), Stesichorus realized his mistake in slandering Helen and recanted to regain his vision; but unlike Stesichorus, Socrates realizes his mistake before blindness befalls him at all. Each of the three figures represents a larger tradition: Homer the epic, Stesichorus the lyric, Socrates the philosophic. Alexander Beecroft attributes to Stesichorus a "revenge of the epichoric:" Stesichorus' vocabulary as quoted by Plato in the *Phaedrus* "shows that the language...is carefully chosen to situate Stesichorus' work in opposition to epic and Panhellenic versions of the story of Helen."<sup>97</sup> According to Beecroft, Stesichorus in the *Phaedrus* represents Nagy's epichoric poetry, poetry that is local and embedded in context. On the other hand, Plato deploys the figure of Stesichorus quite specifically in relation to Helen, perhaps the most Panhellenic figure of all early Greece and an absolute staple of the epic tradition. There is contrast afoot.

To what extent does Stesichorus represent the epichoric in the *Phaedrus*? The tradition of Stesichorus' nimble recovery of his vision in contrast to Homer is instructive. Stesichorus and lyric poetry generally are here associated with knowledge, with music (*mousikē*). As mentioned above, lyric poetry was highly occasional and flexible in its uses.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Beecroft 2006, 47.

<sup>98</sup> Griffith 2009.

Epic, in contrast, is monolithic and unifying, hearkening back to lost antiquity and long-gone Bronze Age heroes; its language is set, the ineluctable drumbeat of dactylic hexameter against the jumble of meters seen across the lyric modes. To draw a lesson from these poetic forms, Homer was too slow and too inflexible to cure himself after blaspheming Helen. Stesichorus was quicker on his feet.

This personifies the theme in the *Phaedrus* exposed by Nussbaum thirty years ago: namely, that in the *Phaedrus* Plato tries to reconcile overwhelming unity/abstraction with unique individuality. This point will become clearer as I go, but for now let me just say that in the comparison of Stesichorus to Homer we also witness a comparison of erotic, local, flexible music to epic, universal, fixed rhapsody. It is in the lyric poets, after all, that we witness a distinct dawning of individual voice in ancient Greece.<sup>99</sup> Traveling rhapsodes all sang Homer more or less the same, but only Sappho sounds like Sappho.<sup>100</sup> Lyric emerges as a useful analogue to philosophy, which itself is depicted by Plato as contextual and fluid. Drew Hyland writes: "...there is truly no such thing as abstract philosophy, philosophy that occurs in no place, philosophy the *topos* of which has no

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<sup>99</sup> I do not intend this as a developmentalist claim. Snell 1982 [1953], for example, sees the lyricists as the next step in the development of individuality and a unique sense of self in early Greece, building upon the more primitive epic tradition. I, however, am convinced by scholarship that posits the co-temporality of epic and lyric, arguing that one did not *necessarily* pre-date the other. Nevertheless, differences in what we might call individual self-expression are obvious to any reader. Darcus 1979 and 1980 convincingly show the sharp increase of first-person singular verb forms in lyric, as well as the increasingly complex and psychological functions ascribed to various "mind" organs (e.g., *thumos* and *psuchē*). This obvious difference between lyric and epic can be explained as a difference in genre rather than along a developmentalist schema. On epic and lyric see Nagy 1979 (and elsewhere), Griffith 2009, and Graziosi and Haubold 2009.

<sup>100</sup> The monumental Homeric Question, makes this a difficult claim. I have no wish to enter debates about when the Homeric poems were written into a fixed and then circulated form. Even before the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were fixed in writing, however, traveling rhapsodes would have had more in common in terms of meter, subject matter, and dialect than any two random lyric poets.

significance for the content of the thought.”<sup>101</sup> Epic is anonymous, the Homeric cycle can be recited by any talented rhapsode in contrast to the intimate and personal lyric. The speaker of Stesichorus’ *Palinode* is the poet himself—*Stesichorus* is struck blind, not some character or persona, and this underpins the entire theatrical performance. Anonymous epic also suggests the weakness of rhetoric examined in the *Phaedrus*. True rhetoric is rhetoric that is inspired by true love, by love for a particular individual, not an anonymous beloved pursued by a dispassionate non-lover espousing a one-size-fits-all rational rhetoric. True rhetoric is meaningful in the sense that Woolf’s love letter is meaningful only when addressed to a particular individual.

We can now make more sense of Socrates’ language when he declines to rationalize the traditional myth of Oreithuia and Boreas and instead redirects the question to self-knowledge.<sup>102</sup> Phaedrus, embedded as he is in a world of sophistry and trendy intellectualism, raises a skeptical brow at the traditional myth and asks rather tellingly: “But by Zeus, Socrates, do you believe this story to be true?”<sup>103</sup> The word “story” in Phaedrus’ question is the Greek *muthologēma*. The word is an odd one, appearing only thrice all extant BCE literature, two of those instances in Plato.<sup>104</sup> This suggests that *muthologēma* is a technical word, perhaps sophistic, having to do with the skeptical rationalization and explanation of traditional myths. Luc Brisson points out that “*muthologēma* indicated more than the result of the action designated by the verb *muthologeō*.

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<sup>101</sup> Hyland 1995, 15.

<sup>102</sup> *Phr.* 229bff.

<sup>103</sup> *Phr.* 229c: ἀλλ’ εἰπέ πρὸς Διός, ὦ Σώκρατες, σὺ τοῦτο τὸ μυθολόγημα πείθαι ἀληθὲς εἶναι;

<sup>104</sup> *Phr.* 229c and *Laws* 663e. Capra 2014.

In Plato, this word also means that the myth in question has been subject to a labor of elaboration and/or interpretation.<sup>105</sup> A *muthologēma* is the rationalized product of myth-making. The idea, then, is that after the myth-making itself ends, what we are left with has gone beyond merely explained tradition, there is some sort of transformation. I would contend that this points to the transformation undergone by Stesichorus in his *Palinode*: the poet explains away the traditional *muthos* of Helen and is transformed (restored to sight). In the case of Socrates the transformation is even more profound: the philosopher is restored to *literal* sight by unveiling himself and is restored to *figurative* (in)sight of true love.<sup>106</sup> This transformation takes place through a union of the poetic (i.e., the mad) and the rational (*mutho* + *logēma*).

What links the two speeches of Socrates to one another and to the speech of Lysias is the topic: love. Beyond this obvious point, however, we are reminded again of the topical nature of lyric poetry. Lyric fits the occasion, remains fluid, adapts to the audience, expresses personal views (views that change as all persons do)—these are the qualities of philosophy visible in the first half of the *Phaedrus*. Socrates' speeches shift and flow, adapted to the moment and to the present purpose (e.g., recanting), addressed to particular individuals (both Phaedrus and the imaginary beloved). Philosophy, like lyric, always arises out of concrete conditions: individuals encounter each other in specific contexts and locations out of which arise questions and a host of possible answers and methods for answering. The Platonic dialogues are thus dramatizations of philosophy

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<sup>105</sup> Brisson 1998, 152.

<sup>106</sup> True love, of course, being transformative in that love is the force that compels the philosopher to seek after wisdom above all else.

itself—but, crucially, *it is a lyric or poetic philosophy*. Consider Socrates’ praise for Stesichorus: “because he was a true follower of the Muses,” “he knew the cause [of his blindness] and immediately composed the verses—‘this story is not true...’”<sup>107</sup> Philosophy becomes something musical, something lyrical, something poetic. Plato is able to contrast the personal, contextual poetry of Stesichorus with the impersonal and ossified poetry of Homer.

Music was a hot topic in Plato’s time. New forms of performance and composition circulated through Greek culture and encountered some opposition. Stesichorus was, unsurprisingly, at the center of some of this poetic controversy. Walter Burkert’s important essay “Rhapsodes Versus Stesichorus” illustrates in its title the position of the lyric poet against the dominant cultural tradition of Homeric rhapsody. Certainly by Plato’s time and possibly even by Stesichorus’ earlier time, rhapsodic poetry had lost much of its music.<sup>108</sup> Whatever debates swirl about the nature and origin of the Homeric epics, there is little doubt that they existed as written, fixed texts in widespread circulation during Stesichorus’ lifespan (ca. 555 BCE). At some point by this time the rhapsodes had largely given up “the element of music and the element of improvisation in favor of a fixed text.”<sup>109</sup> The settling of the Homeric epics into fixed texts lessened the need for the constant musical accompaniment that aided oral improvisation. Epic rhapsodes were, according to Burkert, “ousted from the field of music,” and the reaction

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<sup>107</sup> *Phr.* 243a: ἔνγω τὴν αἰτίαν, καὶ ποιεῖ εὐθὺς...

<sup>108</sup> Burkert 1987.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

was for them to cling ever more tightly to the fixed Homeric text. Fascinatingly, this was the first known instance of a “separation of performer and author,” a separation with which Plato plays so elegantly centuries later in the *Phaedrus*.

Plato’s use of Stesichorus allies Socrates with the musical lyric tradition against the monolithic, unmusical epic tradition. This tells us something about the nature of the Platonic dialogue itself. Plato could have written in the prose of Herodotus or Thucydides, the epic of Homer or Hesiod, any of the numerous lyric forms, the epigrammatic aphorisms of Heraclitus, the Homeric hexameters of Parmenides and Empedocles, the tragic drama so popular in Athens. Instead of any of these options, Plato crafted a new genre that incorporated all these discourses, a new genre that embodies the philosophical act itself.<sup>110</sup> This flexibility and topicality is reflected in Plato’s allying Socrates with Stesichorus in the first half of the *Phaedrus*.

Plato’s use of intertextuality, his allusions to Stesichorus, have several overall effects on the early half of the *Phaedrus*: it helps to make sense of Socrates’ theatrical behavior (e.g., the veiling, the addressing of an invisible boy, pretending not to see Phaedrus, etc.), it shows that inspiration infuses both of Socrates’ speeches and that the second isn’t better simply because it alone is inspired. Plato’s use of Stesichorus also reveals that a tension between types of discourses typically read only in the second half of the *Phaedrus* is actually present in the first half of the text as well. The allusion to Stesichorus reflect the tensions of human life, especially our experience of *erōs*. The

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<sup>110</sup> Hyland 1995 focuses on the existential nature of philosophy in the dialogues. Sinaiko 1965 is the earliest Anglophone scholarship known to me that takes seriously the idea of the dialogues as dramatic representations of philosophy itself. This idea will be discussed further below. See Nightingale 1995 for the standard account of Plato’s innovations with genre.

*Phaedrus* does not cleanly progress from irrationality to rationality, or from the mundane to the divine, or from the particular (the single beloved) to the abstract (metaphysical Erōs). Through Stesichorus, Plato shows how these are not dichotomies to be overcome but rather that they are tensions characteristic of mortal life.<sup>111</sup>

Finally, Stesichorus' presence in the *Phaedrus* highlights the musical nature of philosophy. Philosophy is presented as a form of poetry. Socrates imitates and draws on Stesichorus. Learning from the lyric poet, Socrates declaims a stunning hymn that links inspired madness to truth. The ode and the palinode both contribute to a vision of a new type of discourse—philosophy—that is capable of treating the most important topics of human life, in this case love and divine inspiration. Philosophical discourse, as Socrates exemplifies, is dialectical, requiring multiple individuals interacting in concrete settings. The two speeches echo this dialectical relationship, showing how philosophy arises from concrete conditions (in this case from the insulting of a god and the need to purify). Socrates is partly identified with Stesichorus because of the latter's ability to know (he is *mousikē*), and so the philosopher is partly identified with the poet, with the musician. Philosophy probes questions of truth and love, ventures even to describe the indescribable soul—poetry answers and explores these same things.<sup>112</sup> Philosophical writing also draws

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<sup>111</sup> This means that we should not read the palinode, as Nussbaum and others do, as Plato's repudiation of his earlier dialogues. I think this is the case, and I think the other dialogues also contain in their poetic forms Plato's tragic worldview. It is beyond my scope here, however, to turn to other dialogues.

<sup>112</sup> *Phr.* 246a. Here Socrates says the following about the ψυχή: "To say what kind of a thing it is would require a long exposition, and one calling for utterly superhuman powers..." (trans. Werner 2012, 55). I discuss this passage at length in Chapter Three.

"...these same things": Many scholars have pointed out that it is for this reason precisely that Plato takes the poets and poetry so seriously—they are his major competitors when it comes to questions and themes of justice, wisdom, love, beauty, etc. See, for example, Nightingale 1995.

on poetry's flexibility, its care for the individual (voice and audience). Philosophy, like poetry, can see (recall the motif of vision) the situation and the individuality of any interlocutor and adjust accordingly.<sup>113</sup> Phaedrus memorizes Lysias' speech unthinkingly, devouring the fixed written text and reciting it oblivious to unique audience or place. This uncritical, unmusical rhetoric is disparaged not because it is written or rhetorical *per se* but because it is so inflexible, so blind—that is, so unpoetic and therefore unphilosophical.

### §6, Oblivion

I have so far explored the figure of Stesichorus with the tensions of reason/madness and abstraction/particularity. Specifically I am arguing that what orthodox Platonism sees as the negative sides in these pairs (madness and particularity) are not actually depicted as negatives in the *Phaedrus*. Rather than moving from the imperfections of madness and particularity onward to reason and generality, the *Phaedrus* (in its content and its written form) shows the forces in tension with each other, a tension that also characterizes human life. Going forward with Sappho, I will turn to another tensile pair: memory versus forgetting.

Human life is characterized by tensions that we do not progress beyond, and I think that Plato's *Phaedrus* reflects this in writing. More than that, I believe that the “negative” sides of these tensile pairs are very often not negative at all but quite necessary for human existence. The easiest example at this point is how the *Phaedrus* treats our

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<sup>113</sup> This is part of what Pierre Hadot calls philosophy as a way of life when he warns modern readers against seeing Socrates' different behavior with different interlocutors as contradictory. Socrates behaves differently and gives different advice to different people, “[t]his does not mean that” Socrates “changed his doctrines, but that the needs of his disciples were different” (Hadot 1995, 106). Again, on the topic of context and individual people and specific location, see Hyland 1995.



attachment to particular bodies as a positive. Love for an individual person is not merely a rung on ladder towards love for an abstraction as in the *Symposium* but rather enriches our life and makes us vulnerable in the best ways. In other words, not getting swept up in abstraction is, counter to nearly all orthodox Plato scholarship, a *good* thing.<sup>114</sup>

At this point, let me introduce a new term that will reappear throughout my argument going forward: oblivion.<sup>115</sup> The Ancient Greek *lēthē* means “forgetting” but also “a place of oblivion” in Homeric Greek.<sup>116</sup> “Oblivion” should not be mistaken for a synonym of “destruction,” as its equally standard English definition shows: “the state of being unaware or unconscious of what is happening; the state of being forgotten.”<sup>117</sup> For my purposes, oblivions are those places, literal and figurative, where our human imperfections break through. We forget when we want to remember, we are driven mad and abandon reason, we experience oneness with the world and lose our sense of self, and so on. Oblivions, as a loss of self, often accompany gestalt insights. Sometimes, a gestalt insight may come about because of an oblivion, because of a shift in our attentions. Poet C.K. Williams muses that “perhaps...we have to look away before we can begin

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<sup>114</sup> Again, the canonical argument in the scholarship on this is Nussbaum 1986, chapter 7.

<sup>115</sup> The term “oblivion” has a wide use in Plato scholarship. See Rapp 2014 for a study of what she calls “ordinary oblivions” in Plato. I find Rapp’s work overall to generate excellent questions, and I take her work as a starting point often enough, but her precise argument is frequently unclear. Capra 2014 discusses “lyric oblivions,” which is more in-line with my overall argument and which I touch on below. Gonzales 2012 explores oblivion as loss and forgetting against which Plato fights using myth. For a multi-authored work that explores Heidegger’s influential reading of oblivion in Plato, see Partenie and Rockmore 2005. Hyland 1995, chapter 6, is a focused reading of Heidegger’s criticisms of Plato based around oblivion, and Hyland 2004 gives even more space to the question.

<sup>116</sup> *Liddel-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v.

<sup>117</sup> *OED*, s.v. Etymologically, “oblivion” comes from the Latin *oblivisci* (“forget”).

again.”<sup>118</sup> For example, we sometimes have to just forget about a conflict rather than adequately resolve it if we are to get along with someone. The *Phaedrus* contains many examples of oblivion, and crucially, these oblivions are rarely shown as imperfections that we get beyond. Rather, oblivions are just part of human life. In terms of poetic philosophy: we are not always rational and perfectly in control, sometimes we lose ourselves.

Sappho is a poet of oblivions. Her themes—desire, lack, forgetting, beauty, self-scrutiny—all involve intrusions or disruptions of the self, imperfections of a sort. Stesichorus complicated the straightforward perfection of human nature in the *Phaedrus* and highlighted several tensions of mortal existence. Sappho draws attention to several oblivions characteristic of human life that the *Phaedrus* also then links to philosophy. In the end, philosophy is not about the purification of oblivions and tensions from human life. Instead, philosophy itself ends up being described in just these very terms of oblivion and tension.

## §7, Sappho

One example of an oblivion that Plato and Sappho share is expulsion, specifically expulsion from one’s own self. An important word in the Platonic vocabulary makes an appearance in the palinode: *ekplēttō*, meaning “strike out,” “drive away,” “drive out of one’s senses,” “be beside oneself,” “be astonished or overwhelmed.”<sup>119</sup> This verb and its cognates (*ekplēxis* is the noun) appear fairly often across the Platonic dialogues usually in

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<sup>118</sup> Williams 1998: 91–93.

<sup>119</sup> *Liddel-Scott-Jones Greek-English lexicon*, s.v. For uses in the *Phaedrus* see 250a, 255b, and 259b.

the context of someone being driven mad, of the passions and desires overwhelming and overpowering reason. Unsurprisingly, orthodox Platonism tends to read *ekplēxis* negatively. The only overtly positive use of the word comes from Aristophanes in the *Symposium*, in his famous myth of the divided souls seeking their lost halves.<sup>120</sup> He uses *ekplēxis* to describe how love overwhelms us and knocks us out of ourselves so that we ignore our normal affairs and concerns. We have already seen how desire (*erōs*) is the driving engine of philosophy. Putting this all together, then, we might say that philosophy, driven by desire, risks *ekplēxis*. That is, the search for self-knowledge requires being removed from oneself. This is an example of a productive oblivion, a loss of self that nevertheless leads to self-knowledge.

What about *ekplēxis* in the *Phaedrus*? The most memorable instance comes from Socrates' palinode, when he describes the relationship of the soul to divinity. Orthodox scholarship tends to read this as Plato laying out a program of self-cultivation to leave behind mortality and become godlike. The process goes like this: the lover (a real, divinely mad lover) sees the beautiful beloved and is struck blank. The experience of beauty stimulates the growth of wings on the lover's soul and kickstarts a recollection of and an ascent towards the Forms.<sup>121</sup> The soul remembers its time basking in the glow of these eternal chunks of reality ("Forms" is the word we commonly use for *ta onta*, "the things

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<sup>120</sup> *Symposium* 192b.

<sup>121</sup> *Phr.* 249d.

that are”).<sup>122</sup> Certain lucky souls glimpse flashes of memories of “the plain of *alētheia* [truth].”<sup>123</sup> *Alētheia*, truth, literally means “not forgotten” or “non-oblivion,” *a-* (“not”) *-lēthē* (“oblivion”). So, we have the beauty of the beloved causing *ekplēxis* in the lover, causing an oblivion of reason and a forgetting of self—a forgetting that nonetheless leads to a recollecting of truth, of non-oblivion.

The lover who undergoes these oblivions and is knocked beside himself is described in Sapphic terms.<sup>124</sup> The passage in the *Phaedrus* here begins with a contrast between the corrupt man and the initiated man. The corrupt man (*diephtharmenos*) “does not move quickly from this world to the other, toward beauty itself” and so “he does not revere beauty when he looks upon it but gives himself over to pleasure like a beast.”<sup>125</sup> The initiated man (*artitelēs*), however, upon seeing beauty, shudders (*ephrise*), awestruck (*deimatōn*), drenched with sweat (*hidrōs*) and hot (*metabolē*) until his wings grow forth.<sup>126</sup> These symptoms correspond to those in Sappho’s *No. 31*, one of her only remaining long poems (though still fragmented).

Φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν  
ἔμμεν’ ὄνηρ ὅττις ἐνάντιός τοι

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<sup>122</sup> In the palinode, Socrates describes a realm of the Forms that is above even the firmament (“hyperuranean” literally means “above the sky”). The disembodied souls of both humans and the gods occasionally rise up into this hyperuranean realm and bask in the presence of the Forms. This particular myth, the stylistic crown of the entire Platonic corpus, has been the subject of endless scholarship. See Werner 2012 for an especially thorough study that covers and reviews previous ground. Chapter Three discusses the Forms in detail.

<sup>123</sup> *Phr.* 248b: τὸ ἀληθείας ἰδεῖν πεδίον οὐ̄ ἐστιν.

<sup>124</sup> Yunis 2011, 152.

<sup>125</sup> *Phr.* 250e: ὁ μὲν οὖν μὴ νεοτελής ἢ διεφθαρμένος οὐκ ὀξέως ἐνθένδε ἐκείσε φέρεται πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ κάλλος, θεώμενος αὐτοῦ τὴν τῆδε ἐπωνυμίαν, ὥστ’ οὐ σέβεται προσορών, ἀλλ’ ἠδονῆ παραδοῦς τετραπόδος νόμον βαίνειν ἐπιχειρεῖ καὶ παιδοσπορεῖν, καὶ ὕβρει προσομιλῶν οὐ δέδοικεν.

<sup>126</sup> *Phr.* 251a.

ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδῃ φωνεί-  
 σας ὑπακούει  
 καὶ γελαίσας ἡμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν  
 καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν·  
 ὡς γὰρ <ἔς> ς' ἴδω βρόχε' ὡς με φώνη-  
 ς' οὐδὲν ἔτ' εἴκει,  
 ἀλλὰ καμὲν γλώσσα ἔαγε, λεπτον  
 δ' αὐτίκα χρωὶ πύρ ὑπαδεδρόμακεν,  
 ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδὲν ὄρημ', ἐπιβρό-  
 μεισι δ' ἄκουαι,  
 ἑκάδε μ' ἴδρωσ κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ  
 παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας  
 ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω ἴπιδεύης  
 φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὐταί.  
 ἀλλὰ πὰν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ καὶ πένητα<sup>127</sup>

He seems to me equal to gods that man  
 whoever he is who opposite you  
 sits and listens close  
     to your sweet speaking  
 and lovely laughing—oh it  
 puts the heart in my chest on wings  
 for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking  
     is left in me  
 no: tongue breaks and thin  
 fire is racing under skin  
 and in eyes no sight and drumming  
     fills ears  
 and cold sweat holds me and shaking  
 grips me all, greener than grass  
 I am dead—or almost  
     I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty

Socrates' description of the lover's experience, like Sappho's poem, emphasizes vision—  
 both Sapphic love and Platonic love seem to begin in contemplation of the beloved's  
 beauty. Both texts also emphasize memory, as will be discussed again shortly. Socrates'

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<sup>127</sup> Translation and arrangement of the Greek and English from Carson 2003, 62–63.

palinode continues and climaxes in one of Plato's most remarkable passages, which I quote in full:

...πάσα κεντουμένη κύκλω ἢ φυγὴ οἰστρᾷ καὶ ὀδυνᾶται, μνήμην δ' αὖ ἔχουσα τοῦ καλοῦ γέγηθεν. ἐκ δὲ ἀμφοτέρων μειγμένων ἀδημονεῖ τε τῇ ἀτοπία τοῦ πάθους καὶ ἀποροῦσα λυττᾷ, καὶ ἐμμανῆς οὐσα οὔτε νυκτὸς δύναται καθεύδειν οὔτε μεθ' ἡμέραν οὐδ' ἂν ἢ μένειν, θεὶ δὲ ποθοῦσα ὅπου ἂν οἴηται ὄψεσθαι τὸν ἔχοντα τὸ κάλλος: ἰδοῦσα δὲ καὶ ἐποχετευσαμένη ἴμερον ἔλυσε μὲν τὰ τότε συμπεφραγμένα, ἀναπνοὴν δὲ λαβοῦσα κέντρων τε καὶ ὠδίνων ἔληξεν, ἡδονὴν δ' αὖ ταύτην γλυκυτάτην ἐν τῷ παρόντι καρποῦται. ὅθεν δὴ ἐκοῦσα εἶναι οὐκ ἀπολείπεται, οὐδέ τινα τοῦ καλοῦ περιπλείονος ποιεῖται, ἀλλὰ μητέρων τε καὶ ἀδελφῶν καὶ ἐταίρων πάντων λέλησται, καὶ οὐσίας δι' ἀμέλειαν ἀπολλυμένης παρ' οὐδὲν τίθεται, νομίμων δὲ καὶ εὐσημώνων, οἷς πρὸ τοῦ ἐκαλλωπίζετο, πάντων καταφρονήσασα δουλεῦειν ἐτόιμη καὶ κοιμᾶσθαι ὅπου ἂν ἐᾷ τις ἐγγυτάτω τοῦ πόθου: πρὸς γὰρ τῷ σέβεσθαι τὸν τὸ κάλλος ἔχοντα ἰατρὸν ἠῦρκε μόνον τῶν μεγίστων πόνων. τοῦτο δὲ τὸ πάθος, ὦ παῖ καλέ, πρὸς ὃν δὴ μοι ὁ λόγος, ἄνθρωποι μὲν ἔρωτα ὀνομάζουσιν...<sup>128</sup>

...the whole soul, stung all over, maddened with pain, but then remembering the beautiful the soul rejoices. Because of this mixture of sensations the soul is troubled at its strange condition—perplexed and maddened, unable to sleep in its madness at night nor to keep still in the day, it darts wherever it thinks it will see the possessor of the beauty. And having seen him, having been bathed in waters of yearning, the soul opens passages that had been sealed and has respite from stinging birthing-pains, reaping sweetest pleasure in the moment. The soul will not willingly give this up, nor does the soul value anyone above the beautiful one but has in fact forgotten mother, brother, friends. And the soul does not care for wealth lost out of neglect, and it despises all the customs and proprieties in which it used to take pride—it is ready to be a slave, to sleep wherever it is allowed, as near as possible to the object of desire, for in addition to revering the possessor of beauty, the soul has found in him the sole healer of its greatest sufferings. This experience, my beautiful boy, men call love...

This passage narrates a transition from the physical to the spiritual, from the body to the soul. The physical symptoms of lovesickness convert into mental states (whereas Sappho's *No.31* reverses the trajectory) which are in turn purified and lead to an entire turning of the soul. Elizabeth Belfiore points out that "Socrates' image of the wing recalls, throughout his second speech, the images of winged phalloi frequently represented in

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<sup>128</sup> *Phr.* 251d-252b.

Greek art and graffiti.”<sup>129</sup> The reference to a commonplace erotic image reinforces the fact that in the palinode, love “is described in physical terms.”<sup>130</sup> The abstract emerges via the concrete.<sup>131</sup> Beauty alone among the so-called Platonic Forms instantiates itself on earth. When it comes to Justice or Truth, what we find on earth is a mere shadow of the real thing, but even a beautiful illusion is still beautiful. Beauty shares something with *erōs* in that both are physical and metaphysical at the same time. Thus, the concrete or particular or material is never entirely left behind.

Beauty pulls us apart, tears us in two conflicting directions: up into the abstract and down towards the beautiful body. This portion of the palinode contains a mixture of the abstract and the concrete. The lover and the beloved, for example, appear vague and indistinct while the experience itself comes through in elaborate detail. Financial gain, personal property, the conditions of slavery—physical concerns are forgotten as the soul recollects. Even family and friends, the connections that help define the unique relational web of each person, are dismissed. Oblivion and memory co-exist. Indeed, they are co-dependent. “The lover is someone who forgets everyday values—mother, brothers, friends, riches—only to devote himself exclusively to what Plato refers to as ‘the possessor of beauty,’ that is, the embodiment of the relevant Form.”<sup>132</sup> In a way, the lover forgets himself entirely, forgets who he is and what he does as he acquires a new identity shaped

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<sup>129</sup> Belfiore 2012, 226.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>131</sup> Recall the brief look at David Tracy’s understanding of form from the introductory chapter: “form is disclosive of content...” The idea is that form (in all its different forms) is how we access knowledge of any sort. I will turn to the Forms and to an explicit discussion of their role in knowing in the next chapter.

<sup>132</sup> Capra 2014, 77.

by the experience of beauty. It's worth noting that Socrates attributes this experience to a new initiate, adding a note of sacredness to the proceedings: a conversion has occurred. This matches a description of the philosopher from the *Republic*, as described by Álvaro Vallejo Campos:

The lover's situation is quite similar to that of the prisoner who returns to the cave after having gone outside and had a vision of what is really real. When this man returns to the abode of his former, imprisoned companions, there has been a transformation in him that makes him despise all the honors and accolades rendered there. This change consists not only in a new theoretical conception of the world but in what we might describe as a transformation of the will: they have changed their values and therefore also their desires, because they aspire to have contact with the higher world and despise busying themselves with human affairs.<sup>133</sup>

The lover undergoes a religious conversion midwifed (recall the description of “birthing-pains,” *ōdis*) by oblivion. We have, then, a productive transformation resulting from oblivion/forgetting. Not all oblivions are productive, though—some result in war, as we see from Sappho's *No. 16*.

Οἱ μὲν ἰππῶν στρότον, οἱ δὲ πέσδων,  
οἱ δὲ νάων φαῖσ' ἐπ[ι] γᾶν μέλαι[ν]αν  
ἔ]μμεναι κάλλιστον, ἔγω δὲ κῆν ὄτ—  
τω τις ἔραται.  
πά]γχυ δ' εὔμαρες σύνετον πόησαι  
π]άντι τ[ο]ῦτ', ἀ γὰρ πόλυ περσκέθοισα  
κάλλος [ἀνθ]ρώπων Ἐλένα [τὸ]ν ἄνδρα  
τὸν [αρ]ιστον  
καλλ[ι]ποι]ς ἔβα Ἶς Τροῖαν πλέοι[σα  
κωὺδ[ἐ πα]ῖδος οὐδὲ φίλων το[κ]ήων  
πά[μ]παν] ἐμνάσθ<η>, ἀλλὰ παράγαγ' αὐταν  
οὐδὲ θέλοι]σαν  
]αμπτον γὰρ[  
]...κούφωστ[ ]οη[ ]ν  
]με νὸν Ἀνακτορί[ας δ]νέμναισε  
ς' οὐ ] παρειόσας,<sup>134</sup>

<sup>133</sup> Vallejo Campos 2007, 93–94. My translation from the Spanish original.

<sup>134</sup> Sappho *No. 16* (Voigt ed.). I follow Capra 2014 in following Tempesta 1999, which supplements line 12: οὐδὲ θέλοι].



Some men say an army of horse and some men say an army on foot  
 and some men say an army of ships is the most beautiful thing  
 on the black earth. But I say it is  
     what you love.  
 Easy to make this understood by all.  
 For she who overcame everyone  
 in beauty, Helen,  
     left her fine husband  
 behind and went sailing to Troy.  
 Not for her children nor her dear parents  
 had she a thought, no—  
     ] led her astray  
     ] for  
     ] lightly  
 ] remind me now of Anaktoria  
     who is gone.<sup>135</sup>

Here in *No.16* Sappho sets out what some have described as a poetic demonstration, a sort of argument in poetic form. The poem has been read as sophistic because in it Sappho privileges arguments based on subjective desires, or because in it Sappho shows the relativity of all human standards. Aesthetic readings of the poem focus on *to kalliston* and its place in the evolution of beauty through Greek culture. Feminist readings, rhetorical readings à la Aristotle, and performative and ritualistic readings have all been offered.<sup>136</sup> Sappho flips convention on its head by elevating “what you love” to the rank of “the most beautiful thing.” This stands in obvious contrast to Homeric epic’s focus on warlike virtues of victory, courage, and strength. Again we see the tension

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<sup>135</sup> Translation and arrangement of the Greek and the English are from Carson 2003, 26-27. I have altered only one thing from Carson’s translation: I have removed the parenthesis from around “Helen” and replaced them with commas. I understand Carson’s use of the parentheses, but I dislike the effect it creates in English of making it seem like the poem isn’t really about Helen when it is. The brackets mark unreadable or lost portions of the Greek text.

<sup>136</sup> See Race 1989 on subjective desires, Zellner 2007 on relativism, Koniaris 1967 on beauty, Svenbro 1984 on feminism, Most 1981 on rhetoric, and Dodson-Robinson 2010 on ritual. Bierl 2003 surveys many interpretive approaches to the poem.

between lyric and epic, particularity and generality, flexibility and fixity that we saw with Stesichorus. The poem is ripe for Plato's purposes.

“The most beautiful” translates the Ancient Greek *to kalliston*, from the adjective *kalos*. Nussbaum defines *kalos* succinctly: “a word that signifies at once beauty and nobility. It can be either aesthetic or ethical and is usually both at once, showing how hard it is to distinguish these spheres in Greek thought... ‘Fine’ is perhaps the best single-word translation.”<sup>137</sup> Sappho's claim that the object of love is the finest thing on earth is thus simultaneously a moral and aesthetic claim. Sappho holds up a seemingly subjective preference as the greatest moral and aesthetic good, apparently plunging the debate about what is *kalliston* into mere personal preference. That is, until the turnabout in the second stanza: “easy to make understood by all” is an appeal to a universal standard that we thought the lover couldn't care less about merely a stanza before. *No. 16* thus shows the tension between the personal and the universal on both moral and aesthetic fronts. Sappho's argumentative tone, the feeling that *No. 16* presents a case, is reinforced by *phēmi*, which means “speak” but also “assert” or “put forth” as in a demonstration.<sup>138</sup> This poem makes a sharp and obvious contrast between lyric and epic, with Sappho invoking Helen to repudiate the norms and values of the whole rhapsodic tradition.<sup>139</sup>

Like *No. 16*, Socrates' palinode also presents a view radically at odds with established notions and tries to persuade its audience (Phaedrus, the imaginary beloved,

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<sup>137</sup> Nussbaum 1990: xiii.

<sup>138</sup> *Liddel-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v.

<sup>139</sup> Fränkel 1975, Carson 1986, Yatromanolakis 2009, Hornblower 2009, and Griffith 2009 all explore the contrast in themes and forms between epic and lyric, most with particular attention to Sappho and to this poem.

the reader) by reference to the universally recognized experience of love. Sappho describes Helen as the most beautiful of all humankind, and as forgetful of relatives (her children and parents) and riches. Sappho explicitly writes that Helen *forgets* these traditional values: the verb is *ollesse*, from *ollumi* meaning “destroy,” which is related to *lēthē* (“oblivion”). Sappho’s Helen, like Socrates’ lover, undergoes a transformation in which mundane affairs of family and wealth are forgotten.

The palinode also echoes the language of *No. 16*. Both texts are an exploration of human love and its objects. In Sappho we find *ottō tis eratai* (“whatever one loves”) and in Plato we find *erāi men oun, hotou de aporei* (“he loves but knows not whom”).<sup>140</sup> Sappho’s speaker shifts attention from Helen to her *own* beloved, remembering Anactoria’s shining face (*kamarukhma lampron idēn prosōpō*).<sup>141</sup> This is similar to Socrates’ description of the Form of Beauty (*kallos idein prosōpō*) and the lover’s seeing a divine face (*hotan theoeides prosōpon idēi*).<sup>142</sup> The move from Helen to Anactoria also takes us from the universal back to the particular, from a Panhellenic figure to a personal beloved. Unlike orthodox Platonism in which we transcend from concrete particulars into theoretical abstraction, here we crash back to earth. Instead of climbing Diotima’s ladder, we slide down Sappho’s banister.

Sappho’s Helen, like Socrates’ lover, forgets herself, her ties, her concerns, caught-up in the madness of love. In line 11 we have the verb *emnasthē*, from *mimnēskō* meaning

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<sup>140</sup> *Phr.* 255d.

<sup>141</sup> Cf. Capra 2014.

<sup>142</sup> *Phr.* 250b and 251a.

“to remember.” In line 15 we have *onemnaise*, from *anamimnēskō* meaning “to cause someone to remember.” This latter verb is especially rare for the time and genre, with only one other appearance in a Sappho poem and another in Sophocles.<sup>143</sup> Anactoria, who was probably Sappho’s student, features as the object of desire in several other poems. Here in *No. 16*, Anactoria is physically absent, present only as a shining memory. Socrates’ earthbound beloved also shines (*elampen*) and radiates light (*astraptousan*).<sup>144</sup> Evocation of the beloved in both the poem and the dialogue is a glittering affair, replete with light and vision. More, in both texts, vision and light have some tie to memory, and memory in both cases is stimulated by the experience of beauty.

Let me now say a little more about how beauty in particular acts as an oblivion.

We return to Sappho’s *No. 31*.

Φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν  
 ἔμμεν’ ὄνηρ ὅττις ἐνάντιός τοι  
 ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδου φωνεί-  
 σας ὑπακούει  
 καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν, τό μ’ ἦ μὰν  
 καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν·  
 ὡς γὰρ <ἔς> ζ’ ἴδω βρόχε’ ὡς με φώνη-  
 ζ’ οὐδὲν ἔτ’ εἴκει,  
 ἀλλὰ καμ μὲν γλώσσα ἔαγε, λέπτον  
 δ’ αὐτίκα χρωὶ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμακεν,  
 ὀπάτεσσι δ’ οὐδὲν ὄρημι’, ἐπιβρό-  
 μεισι δ’ ἄκουαι,  
 ἔκαδε μ’ ἴδρωσ κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ  
 παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας  
 ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ’ ὀλίγω πιδεύης  
 φαίνομ’ ἔμ’ αὐται.  
 ἀλλὰ πᾶν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ καὶ πένητα

He seems to me equal to gods that man  
 whoever he is who opposite you  
 sits and listens close  
 to your sweet speaking  
 and lovely laughing—oh it  
 puts the heart in my chest on wings  
 for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking  
 is left in me  
 no: tongue breaks and thin  
 fire is racing under skin  
 and in eyes no sight and drumming  
 fills ears  
 and cold sweat holds me and shaking  
 grips me all, greener than grass  
 I am dead—or almost  
 I seem to me.  
 But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty

<sup>143</sup> Sappho *No. 94* and Sophocles’ *Oidipous Tyrannos* 1133, as per Capra 2014.

<sup>144</sup> *Phr.* 250b and 254d.

The poem begins with an appearance: “seems to me” (*phainetai moi*), a subjective impression. What makes “that man” (*kēnos*) seem “equal to gods” (*isos theoisin*) is not any objective quality on his part but a comparison made by the speaker. The unnamed man is significant because the speaker imbues him with significance; nothing about the man himself is ever mentioned. This mimics the behavior of lovers who imbue things with meaning (e.g., the card he wrote me, the itchy sweater she wore, the ugly park where we had our first date). So right away we know that Sappho is under the spell of *erōs*. The poem goes on to catalog a breakdown in Sappho’s perceptual powers: vision, hearing, speech, and touch all reach some dysfunctional limit. What’s left? “I am...” (*emmi*). The core of Sappho’s perception is all that remains by the end of the poem, a naked self. Curiously, this self soon abandons itself: “I am dead—or almost I seem to me.” Sappho objectifies her own self, steps outside of herself and observes from a distance. This is *ekplēxis*—an experience of beauty that drives out rational thought, kicks up a frenzy of confusion, knocks us outside of our self. Sappho is explicit about the fact that this *ekplēxis* is a form of destruction of the self (“I am dead”).

Like Socrates’ purification, this de-selfing is a transformation. The lover does not see the world the same way (how can she when, as per Sappho, “in eyes no sight”?). This is a wholistic experience, not merely a rational apprehension but also a change in behavior—the behavior of the lover versus the non-lover—and in one’s bodily existence itself. Destruction leads to change, which allows us to grasp some new angle or way of being in the world. Iris Murdoch writes that the most “obvious thing in our surroundings

which is an occasion for ‘unselfing’...is popularly called beauty.”<sup>145</sup> The removal of one’s self from the center of attention allows for something else to enter. In this case, forgetting oneself makes room for something else, and this is only possible because of the porous nature of human experience, the way our attention wavers and shifts. In terms of the *Phaedrus*, the forgetful transformation undergone by the lover in the palinode draws both lover and beloved closer to truth and ignites the engines of philosophy.

Sappho’s Helen undergoes an experience of unselfing similar to the lover in the *Phaedrus*, a forgetting that generates a new experience of love, all brought about by an encounter with beauty. Helen Foley mentions “a tendency in recent feminist criticism that pits Sappho as the paradigmatic celebrant of the materiality of the body against Plato’s philosophic aim to transcend it.”<sup>146</sup> Sappho’s lyrics are anchored to the concrete world, threaded through fleshy and bloody bodies, unconcerned with Platonic abstractions. I am reading the *Phaedrus* as proof against any reading of Plato as concerned purely with Platonic abstractions. The *Phaedrus* praises the physical body and physical love, upheld not only as the inciting spark of philosophy but as the anchor that keeps philosophy from floating into the realm of the immortal and disengaging from human life. This is not merely rhetorical flourish on my part. The great insight of Nussbaum on the *Phaedrus* is that the Platonic good life is described explicitly in terms of a physical sexual relationship that is very much anchored to particular bodies.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Murdoch 1997, 369.

<sup>146</sup> Foley 1998.

<sup>147</sup> Nussbaum 1986: chapter 7.

Here I must depart from Andrea Capra's excellent analysis on which I have thus far occasionally drawn. Although Capra's philological arguments convince me, he still approaches Plato with a preconceived view of what the dialogues are about: he falls prey to the circular reasoning of teleological interpretation. Capra quotes and endorses Elizabeth Pender:

Plato draws directly on the poetic language of the lyric poets, but he sets against them a need for self-control to redirect the soul's energy from physical beauty to the Forms" and "in *Phaedrus* [unlike in Sappho's poetry] memory does not serve as a consolation but as a spur to further effort—it is merely the beginning of an arduous task...Thus through his story of recollection Plato challenges the lyric tradition by placing *erôs* within a much larger framework of experience and understanding.<sup>148</sup>

Capra and Pender argue that Sappho and Plato share in common an experience of oblivion that "brings about a complete reversal of values, resulting in the severing of all ties that bind us to everyday life."<sup>149</sup> Capra calls this "lyric oblivion" and argues that unlike Sappho, Plato moves on from lyric oblivion. Sappho wallows in nostalgia, in the particular details of her beloved: "she intensifies the light shining on the face of a dancer, magnifies the hand playing a lyre, and so on. Somehow, Sappho makes a sad fetish of her beloved ones."<sup>150</sup> Plato, on the other hand, takes lyric oblivion and then ascends away from the particular into the hyperuranian realm of the Forms. Capra references *Republic* X in which Socrates attacks poetry "precisely because it indulges in 'recollection of *pathos*'

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<sup>148</sup> Capra 2014, 81 quoting from Pender 2007, 54-55. The bracketed insertion is Capra's.

<sup>149</sup> Capra 2014, 81.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. As a separate issue, Capra's notion that by fixing on seemingly mundane details Sappho "makes a sad fetish of her beloved ones" is, I believe, entirely wrong. The whole point of lyric poetry is to preserve particulars in their own proper existence, to do justice to *what is*, to render the ordinary world in its ordinariness. To disparage the poet for doing so is to miss the point.

(*anamnēseis tou pathous*).”<sup>151</sup> But how hostile to *pathos* can Socrates be when earlier in the *Republic* he begins his positive construction of the ideal city precisely by asking Glaucon to imagine and think through *pathos*.<sup>152</sup> Capra also here appears to seamlessly associate Socrates in the *Republic* with Plato. Discussing Plato’s use of lyric oblivion in the *Phaedrus* versus Sappho’s is not helped by assuming an identification of Socrates with Plato.

After proving the importance of Sappho’s poetry in the *Phaedrus*, Capra concludes that Plato “makes the idea of oblivion a crucial step in the transcending of earthly pursuits his own, but turns Sappho’s erotic remembrances into the no less erotic recollection of the Forms.”<sup>153</sup> But transcendence is not the goal in the *Phaedrus*. It is unclear, for example, how Plato’s remembrances could still be erotic without also being worldly, since the crucial point about Erōs is that he is simultaneously physical and metaphysical. Also, we cannot ignore that by the end of the *Phaedrus*, the good life is explicitly described in bodily, sexual terms. A good life requires vulnerability and weakness, what Nussbaum calls fragility. The *Phaedrus* does not endorse any straightforward or simple transcendence. Plato’s deployment of Sappho is thus best seen as an augmentation or description of poetic philosophy in the *Phaedrus*, not as something alien to or contrasting with philosophy.

## §8, Conclusion

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 82. *Rep.* 604d. I have Romanized Capra’s parenthetical Greek citation.

<sup>152</sup> *Rep.* 514a. I will discuss this passage at length below.

<sup>153</sup> Capra 2014, 87.



Through the figures of Stesichorus and Sappho, Plato blurs all sorts of dichotomies typically representative of orthodox Platonism. With these lyric poets, Plato draws attention to an array of tensions present in human life. On one side, usually upheld by orthodox Platonism, we have abstraction, generality, the soul, remembering, divinity, and a self that is isolated and autonomous. On the other side we have particularity and individuality, the body, forgetting, mortality, and a self characterized by intrusions from outside forces. Neither of these sides “wins” in the *Phaedrus*, and in both its written form (a torqued unity) and its content the *Phaedrus* reflects a truth about human experience—namely, that our own lives are examples of torqued unity, that we cannot subsist on pure godlike reason alone. The *Phaedrus* enacts this on the level of form through a kind of erotic writing, an ensouled writing that means insofar as it gets the reader to respond, and this is partly why Plato deploys lyric poets, for their responsive particularity.

## CHAPTER III

### PLATO AND GESTALT THINKING

- John Conway:* ...[I]f I draw you a picture [of some geometrical theorem], you'll immediately see that it is true.
- Lister Sinclair:* Simple, yes. Is simple the same as elegant? Is the best proof a simple proof?
- John Conway:* I'd hesitate to say it's the same, but it's very closely related, isn't it?...You can look at the whole thing and appreciate it—
- Lister Sinclair:* —under certain circumstances, you can hold the whole proof in your mind at once, so to speak, and that would be elegant.
- John Conway:* Yes. There's a funny feeling I get sometimes...everything's as it should be.
- Lister Sinclair:* ...[T]hat sense of rightness, of everything falling beautifully into place—
- John Conway:* —fitting.<sup>1</sup>

σωφρονεῖν ἀρετὴ μέγιστη καὶ σοφίη ἀληθέα λέγειν καὶ ποιεῖν κατὰ φύσιν ἐπαίοντας

Thinking well is the greatest excellence and wisdom: to act and speak what is true, perceiving things according to their nature.

Heraclitus, D-K Fr.112 (trans., Kahn)

### §1, The Forms

Plato's greatest claim to philosophical fame is the Theory of Forms: the doctrine that there is a realm of intangible, imperishable entities that by virtue of their own being are paradigms lending varying degrees of reality to the changeable world. In the Western intellectual tradition, Plato is known more than anything else as a metaphysician, in large part because of the Forms.<sup>2</sup> The sea of scholarship on the Forms is daunting and goes all the way back to Plato's first commentator: Aristotle.

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<sup>1</sup> John Conway and Lister Sinclair, "Math and Aftermath." CBC *Ideas* broadcast (May 1997), transcript, pp. 14–15.

<sup>2</sup> Lane 2001, chapter 2 gives a detailed historical overview of the reception of Plato as a metaphysician. She attributes much of that reputation to Nietzsche: "Modern attacks on Plato and Platonism cannot be understood without seeing them in the context of [Nietzsche's] heavy-handed assimilation [of Plato] to Kant, an assimilation which confuses our understanding of both" (61).

In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle criticizes Plato's understanding of human thought.<sup>3</sup> He says that Plato inherits from Heraclitus the belief that the world around us is in flux and therefore any stable, unchanging knowledge is impossible.<sup>4</sup> Plato responds, according to Aristotle, by positing the existence of Forms: transcendent pieces of pure being on which all our own world is modeled. Aristotle's description of Plato has remained the textbook understanding of the Forms to this day.<sup>5</sup> To some extent this is historical quirk. Through the Middle Ages and into modernity, Plato was transmitted mostly via Neo-Platonists like Plotinus who based their interpretations on Aristotle's. Plato's whole corpus was not translated into Latin until 1484, and not into English until 1804.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the major works of Aristotle circulated widely in Latin before 1200, and Dante calls Aristotle "the Master of Those Who Know" because his thought was *the* central pillar of European education, philosophy, and theology up until Descartes. That Aristotle's understanding of Plato became orthodoxy is unsurprising in this light.

Biases in modern professional philosophy have kept Aristotle's understanding of Plato's Forms generally intact. For example, consider these remarks by Gail Fine:

Aristotle presents and criticises arguments for the existence of Platonic forms, and sketches his alternative. [Aristotle's *On Ideas*] is an especially rich source for anyone who

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<sup>3</sup> *Metaphysics* 1078b: "The theory of Forms occurred to those [Plato] who enunciated it because they were convinced as to the true nature of reality by the doctrine of Heraclitus, that all sensible things are always in a state of flux; so that if there is to be any knowledge of thought about anything, there must be certain other entities, besides sensible ones, which persist" (translation from Fine 1993).

<sup>4</sup> It's worth noting that Aristotle basically sees all philosophy prior to him as a series of flawed progressions leading up his own correct theories. See Laks 2018. Roochnik 2004 is a neat summary of Plato's inheritance from Heraclitus (and Parmenides); see also classics like Burnet 1892 and Russell 1945. For the relationship between Heraclitus and Plato, see Kahn 1985, Moyal 1988, and Silverman 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Lear 1988 explains how Aristotle differentiates his theories from what came before.

<sup>6</sup> Lane 2001.

wants to understand Plato's theory of forms. For it characterises forms, and sets out arguments for their existence, more systematically than Plato does...<sup>7</sup>

Aristotle takes what is not a systematic theory in Plato and turns it into one, thus rendering it in a doctrinal argument acceptable to modern professional philosophy. In a similar vein, Terence Irwin argues that because Aristotle was closer than us to Plato, we ought to accept his understanding of Plato's Forms "unless we find strong reasons in the dialogues themselves" not to.<sup>8</sup> That the dramatic dialogue form itself offers such strong reasons does not occur to Irwin. W.K.C. Guthrie, himself an orthodox Plato scholar, reminds us that Aristotle saw all previous Greek philosophy as a linear progression leading up to his own ideas and often distorts earlier thinkers (including his teacher Plato) to fit his own narrative.<sup>9</sup> Historiography aside, the blunt fact is that nowhere in any of the dialogues can we find anything like a systematic, comprehensive theory of Forms.<sup>10</sup> Socrates brings up the Forms only in a few dialogues, and these discussions do not use anything resembling a unified vocabulary or consistent arguments.<sup>11</sup> Modern professional

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<sup>7</sup> Fine 1993, vii.

<sup>8</sup> Irwin 1992, 77.

<sup>9</sup> Guthrie 1978, 421.

<sup>10</sup> Welton 2002 offers a good overview. See also Barris 2009, especially the introduction. Hyland 2002 is an especially robust attack on the so-called theory of Forms.

<sup>11</sup> To give just a few examples, all the following terms or phrases end up rendered into English as "Forms" or sometimes "Ideas:" *ta onta* ("the things that are") in *Cratylus* 439–440, *eidos* ("shape, that which is seen") in *Symposium* 210b and *Republic* 596a, *auto to kalon* ("the beautiful itself") in *Phaedo* 110c, *ousian* ("being") in *Theaetetus* 185a, *eidolon* ("phantom") in *Seventh Letter* 342b. See also *Sophist* 246–248, *Parmenides* passim, and many others.

philosophy has filled these lacunae with explicit systems and theories.<sup>12</sup> By this chapter's end I hope to have sketched an alternative of the Forms as metaphor rather than literal metaphysical system.

I am not arguing that the Forms are unimportant in Plato. Like a certain motif in a song, they arise often enough to warrant serious consideration. So what can we say about the Forms that does not commit us to an orthodox Platonic metaphysics? The Forms are Plato's metaphorical way of talking about experiences of meaning or truth that are otherwise hard to talk about and nearly impossible to analyze. To experience meaning is to perceive the coherence of a form/gestalt, to "hear" resonance. Integrated forms are what resonate, and so to have an experience of meaning is to perceive a form. Having meaning is embodying meaning: the meaning of the thing is not separable from its form. To be rather basic about it, forms are shapes/gestalts—a melody, a pattern, an insight about someone, the comprehension of a visual proof, and so on. When we perceive forms, we recognize and are struck by their integration. Forms resonate with us. *"But is that what Plato means by Forms?"*

It's important now to recall that Plato never tells us *what* he means by Forms. In fact, even the English term "Forms" (or sometimes "Ideas") belies the actual variety of

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<sup>12</sup> William Welton sums up the scattered appearance of the Forms thus: "Although Plato's dialogues introduced forms to the world, there is no single text that gives a really full account of them; instead, Socrates and others characters say various things about forms in various contexts, mostly in the guise of oracular pronouncements or mere hints, offering very truncated explanations and arguments at best..." (Welton 2002, 2).

language Plato uses throughout the dialogues.<sup>13</sup> Often, for example, what we call the Forms are just what Plato calls *ta onta* (“the things that are”).<sup>14</sup> Here is an instructive passage from the *Phaedrus* about the Forms:

...τὰ ἔξω τοῦ οὐρανοῦ...ἡ γὰρ ἀχρώματος τε καὶ ἀσχημάτιστος καὶ ἀναφής οὐσία ὄντως οὐδὲσα, ψυχῆς κυβερνήτη μόνῳ θεατῇ νῶ, περὶ ἧν τὸ τῆς ἀληθοῦς ἐπιστήμης γένος τοῦτον ἔχει τὴν τόπον.<sup>15</sup>

...the things beyond the sky...the colorless, formless, intangible—yet existing—substance, with which the species of truth knowledge is concerned, and which is visible only to the mind, that captain of the soul.

“The things beyond the sky” encapsulates the entire passage. Socrates is talking about some sort of existence or being (*ousia*) that really is (*ontōs*) even though it has no color or tangibility. Most ironically, these so-called Forms are described as *askhēmatistos*, literally “not schematic,” or “not formed.” The Forms, it would seem, are formless. This might explain why such paradoxical objects are “visible only to the mind” (*monōi theatē nōi*), but I would like to meet the person who, even in their mind, could picture such a thing.

What I’m getting at is that the Forms make no sense if we try to think by the rules of analytic thought, if we try to make everything explicitly verifiable and to avoid contradiction. (I discuss this in Chapter Four with reference to the *Parmenides*.) I think, however, that Plato has given us a passage remarkably amenable to gestalt thinking. Understanding the Forms in this passage is a spatial experience (“*visible* to the mind”) that

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<sup>13</sup> To give just a few examples, all the following terms or phrases end up rendered into English as “Forms” or sometimes “Ideas:” *ta onta* (“the things that are”) in *Cratylus* 439–440, *eidos* (“shape, that which is seen”) in *Symposium* 210b and *Republic* 596a, *auto to kalon* (“the beautiful itself”) in *Phaedo* 110c, *ousian* (“being”) in *Theaetetus* 185a, *eidolon* (“phantom”) in *Seventh Letter* 342b. See also *Sophist* 246–248, *Parmenides* passim, and many others.

<sup>14</sup> For example, *Phaedrus* 248a.

<sup>15</sup> *Phr.* 247c–d.

cannot be empirically verified because it lacks all possible physical markers. To say that something is “beyond the sky” (*eksō tou ouranou*) in Plato’s time is to make a sort of ineffability claim: the sky, divided into various arrangements of spheres depending on the source, is basically the outer limit of existence.<sup>16</sup> This passage shows Socrates wrestling with ineffability. He knows there’s some meaningful thing, but he can’t verify it or explain it using language.

This is the problem that confronts most attempts to explain the Forms across the dialogues. They are thoroughly resistant to systematization and logical evening-out. The Forms appear variously in myths, in images, in logical proofs, and more, and if we take Plato to be laying down a theory in our sense of the word, we are forced to admit that it’s a sloppy theory full of contradiction and inconsistency. In this chapter, I want to defend the Forms, but not as a systematic theory. Rather, I want to defend the Forms as a metaphor for the groping attempt to perceive meaningful truth in the world outside of ourselves.

## §2, Truth

If the Forms are a metaphorical attempt to talk about the experience of meaning or truth, then I need to explain how I am using the word “truth.” A comprehensive review of truth, perhaps the single biggest topic in philosophy, is beyond my scope here.<sup>17</sup> But let me just briefly explain how the idea of truth in poetic philosophy differs from the

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<sup>16</sup> Kouremenos 2018. Even the Olympian gods are not, in our extant sources, transcendent. They exist in *this* world.

<sup>17</sup> See Glanzburg 2018 for a survey of the contemporary philosophical landscape on truth. Barris 2009 offers a good overview of contemporary philosophical work on truth, especially in the context of Plato scholarship.

most widespread understanding of truth in modern professional philosophy: the correspondence model of truth.

On the correspondence model, truth is a correspondence between what is said and what is actually the case in the world. “*The apple is red*” is true if the apple referred to in the statement is actually red. Truth is a quality that a statement has by virtue of corresponding to some fact in the world. Truth is thus a matter of facts, and facts are objectively verifiable things. As a reigning theory, correspondence models of truth have come in for plenty of criticism. For example, if a truth is something that corresponds to a fact, then we must answer the question, *what is a fact?* Are facts things that exist independently in the world?<sup>18</sup> Sometimes, Plato’s Forms are taken to be possible answers to this line of questioning.<sup>19</sup> Correspondence theories were advocated by many of analytic philosophy’s giants like Moore, Russell, Austin, and the early Wittgenstein.<sup>20</sup>

For my purposes here, what is important to point out is the conceptual scaffolding that comes with any correspondence model of truth.<sup>21</sup> Correspondence models of truth fit seamlessly into the systematic analyses of modern philosophy. Emphasis is on

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Davidson 1984.

<sup>19</sup> This leads to the absurdist notion that there exists a Form of everything. So the statement “*I am not angry*” is true only insofar as it corresponds to a factual situation in which I am not angry. This fact, in turn, exists only insofar as it partakes in the Form of Ryan Not Being Angry. Now we have a Form for a fact, but does this mean that *every possible fact* has a Form? And what about counterfactuals, thus giving us Forms for things that don’t exist?

<sup>20</sup> Austin 1950, Russell 1910 and 1956, Wittgenstein 1922, and Moore 1902.

<sup>21</sup> Dowden and Swartz 2019 explores how, as such a central concept, truth necessarily intersects with many other topics in philosophy, so that to discuss truth is also discuss metaphysics, epistemology, language, and so on. Most of the other major theories of truth throughout the 20th century have been responses to the correspondence model and thus share some of its underlying concerns or even assumptions. I do not discuss them here because my goal is just to describe a model of truth suitable for poetic philosophy. For an overview of pragmatist theories see Capps 2019, for deflationary theories see Stoljar and Damjanovic 2014, and for Tarskian semantic theories see Hodges 2018.



objectively verifiable criteria, a sort of checklist. According to *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, correspondence theories hold that “truth is a certain relationship—the relationship that holds between a proposition and its corresponding fact.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, truth is *not* a feature of a proposition itself but of a relationship between a proposition and a fact. The way a proposition is worded, its *form*, does not matter, or at least, it matters only insofar as we must understand it to check it against a state of affairs. In this way, correspondence theories are like utility readings of Plato’s form: the form of a proposition is attended to only *in order to* more accurately check it against a fact, the same way many readers of Plato attend to his poetic dimensions only *in order to* suck out the philosophical marrow within, never realizing that the poetic form itself can be philosophical.

But what would it mean for a form to be true outside of the correspondence model? My use of truth here is as a kind of coherence rather than correspondence. Unfortunately for my purposes, there is another popular model of truth called “coherence truth,” but it is a different sort of coherence than what I am talking about. Standard coherence models say that a proposition is true not when it is verified but when it fits with a whole array of other propositions. For example: a friend takes hallucinogens and begins raving about blue tigers flying above the city. Correspondence truth would simply fact check him and say, “*untrue*.” Standard coherence truth would see how his claims fit into an existing network of other claims: tigers are not blue, tigers cannot fly, tigers do not live in cities, the zoo is very far away, people taking hallucinogens

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<sup>22</sup> Dowden and Swartz 2019.

hallucinate, and so on. The coherence of these propositions is what makes our friend's statement untrue. My problem with this standard coherence model is that it still relies on correspondence: propositions are true or false depending on whether we can *check* or *verify* them against other propositions. Correspondence models focus on whether a proposition corresponds with facts and actual situations; standard coherence models focus on whether a proposition corresponds with other propositions—but both models still rely on the ability to verify linguistically expressed propositions. That is where my coherence truth differs. My version of coherence truth holds that to grasp a truth is to see how a thing coheres. Neither correspondence nor standard coherence models can account for the experience of truth we might have while listening to a Beethoven string quartet.

*“And what exactly would that be? The truth of a string quartet?”* If the language sounds funny, consider a more commonplace example: *“he’s a true friend.”* This idea rests on the seldom-used English verb “to true,” meaning “bring an object into position or alignment with other things.”<sup>23</sup> It is related to the Old English *troth*, which means something like “bind together” and from which we get our “betrothed.”<sup>24</sup> Poetic philosophy is thinking in love with clarity understood as resonance, and the experience of resonance is the experience of meaning and truth. An experience of truth on this model is not an actuarial process of checking whether a linguistic statement corresponds to a list of facts: *“is he a true friend? Let’s get out the True Friend Algorithm and plug in his characteristics to find out.”* To experience truth is to be struck breathless, suddenly aware of a new configuration that

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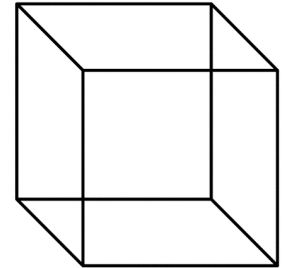
<sup>23</sup> *OED*, s.v.

<sup>24</sup> Klein 1966, s.v.

illuminates the way things are, that nudges our perspective. Coherence truth is related to integrity. We trust people integrity because they are *integrated*, because their actions over time cohere into a whole of which we can make sense rather than disperse into a scattering of contradictory and untrustworthy actions over time. A true friend is an integrated friend. This is why those resonant forms that strike us are integrated: we do not look at them and think “*what the hell is that?*” The coherence is obvious, strikingly so.

“*So anything that strikes someone is true? Doesn't this set us on a slippery slope towards relativism in which each person gets their own version of truth?*” No. Consider the Necker cube. We see both an upward-facing cube and a downward-facing cube, both of which exist simultaneously. In fact, both cubes share the same necessary structure such that changing one cube would change the other (this is the importance of integration).

Now, seeing one cube at any time precludes seeing the other cube, but that does not mean it isn't there waiting to be seen. Further, if someone were to describe a sphere while looking at the Necker cube, they would be wrong, no matter how strongly the sphere appeared to them.



Similarly wrong would be any attempt to claim that all we have here is a meaningless assortment of incoherent lines. My coherence truth does not negate the existence of reality, nor does it mean that anything goes and all grasps of truth are equally good. What it *does* point to is the role of ambiguity in truth.

Each of the two cubes is a gestalt, a meaning to be grasped (perceiving a form is grasping a meaning). So we can say that the Necker Cube has multiple meanings that exist at the same time even though they contradict each other—this is ambiguity. Modern

professional philosophy, based as it is on these mechanistic and analytic assumptions, abhors ambiguity and tries to break it apart with analysis into logically smooth systems.<sup>25</sup> Recall Descartes' *Discourse on the Method* where he argues that distinctness requires separability into discrete and manipulable elements. Correspondence truth is all about verifying, which is difficult in ambiguous cases because verification requires fact checking, clarity understood as logical precision. An ambiguous ruler or speedometer, for example, is useless. We saw in Chapter One the idea in analytic thought that thinking should be mechanical and independent of individual bias: *does the proposition correspond to some actual state? Yes or No?* This is a programmable binary that anyone at any time can use. Truth is not dependent on any particular viewpoint in the correspondence model. I appreciate the attempt to avoid relativism, but my point is that just because something is not mechanistically verifiable *does not mean* it isn't true. We may not be able to prove it, but must we dismiss as meaningless anything unprovable? Especially when the idea of proof itself rests on notions of verifiable criteria, the very thing coherence truth rejects? To criticize coherence truth for not being able to defend itself in the court of analytical reasoning is like criticizing a fish for dying on land.

Let me close this section with an example of how the correspondence model of truth inhibits our reading of Plato. In the palinode, just before he starts describing the immortal soul, Socrates issues a disclaimer:

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<sup>25</sup> I suspect there is fruitful work to be done on the conflation of ambiguity with vagueness. Analytic thinking seems to treat them similarly, but ambiguity does not deny or prevent us from seeing the existence of distinct forms even if they are in contradiction with each other. The opposite of clarity is vagueness, not ambiguity.

περι δὲ τῆς ἰδέας αὐτῆς ὧδε λεκτέον. οἶον μὲν ἔστι, πάντη πάντως θείας εἶναι καὶ μακρᾶς διηγήσεως, ὧ δὲ ἔοικεν, ἀνθρωπίνης τε καὶ ἐλάττονος: ταύτη οὖν λέγωμεν.<sup>26</sup>

About its [the soul's] form we must say the following. To say what kind of thing it is would require a long exposition, and one calling for utterly superhuman powers; to say what it resembles requires a shorter one, and one within human capacities. So let us speak in the latter way.

Daniel Werner, in his helpful book on myth and poetry in the *Phaedrus*, highlights the key idea here: “From the point of view of the truth status of the palinode, the fundamental aspect of this passage is the polarity between what the soul *is* (ἔστι) and what the soul is *like* (ὧ δὲ ἔοικεν).”<sup>27</sup> This is a common dichotomy in Platonism that arises from seeing Plato as a metaphysical dualist: the Forms are real, and our world down here is illusory. Werner says that “the philosopher who offered an account of the soul as it *is* would thus himself need to have *knowledge* of the nature of the soul.”<sup>28</sup> He then claims that Socrates makes “use of an *image* (of a chariot team of two horses and a driver), a second-best mode of exposition that is neither comprehensive nor fully truthful.”<sup>29</sup> The idea is that Plato uses poetic language to get at a *likeness* of the soul, which means that poetic language is only a second-order discourse incapable of actual truth. Werner elaborates, saying that a mythic image “is not comprehensive because an image can only offer an individual slice or reflection of the original reality...And it is not fully truthful because an image by its

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<sup>26</sup> *Phr.* 246a. Translation is from Werner 2012, 55.

<sup>27</sup> Werner 2012, 55.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*: 55-56.

very nature is not identical to the original reality, and so partially depicts that reality as something that it is *not*.”<sup>30</sup>

Werner here represents orthodox Platonism: arguing that Socrates’ use of poetic imagery to describe the soul is a second-best discourse because it can only say what the soul is *like* and not what it *is*. But this relies on a correspondence model of truth in which anything we say about the soul can be verified against the actual soul. Werner’s view has at least two immediate consequences. First, we must assume that Plato is talking about a literal immortal soul and that we can verify anything said about it against the real thing—sitting in a jar somewhere, or a textbook? Second, we must admit that poetry is a second-best discourse because it is not a direct description of this literal soul. My coherence truth gets around these problems because it locates truth in the perception of wholes, in seeing how things hang together rather than verifying. And without a literal metaphysical soul somewhere, poetry need not accept this second-class status.

Consider that Plato in his own words in the *Seventh Letter* gives us good reason not to take the myth of the immortal soul literally:

But this much I can certainly declare...there does not exist, nor will there ever exist, any treatise of mine on the subject. For it is not possible to to speak of it as we speak of other kinds of studies [ῥητὸν γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἐστὶν ὡς ἄλλα μαθήματα]. Rather, out of long abiding [ἐκ πολλῆς συνουσίας] and living with the issue itself [i.e., philosophy], suddenly [ἐξαίφνης], as when a spark leaps from a fire and kindles a light [οἶον ἀπὸ πυρὸς πηδίσαντος ἐξαφθὲν φῶς], [philosophical understanding] arises in the soul [ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ], and then sustains [τρέφει] itself thereafter.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> *Seventh Letter* 341b–d. My translation. See Isnardi Parente 2002 for a good discussion of the *Seventh Letter*’s authenticity.

So here we have Plato in his words saying that his philosophical ideas cannot be captured in words. An inability to capture the Forms in writing suggests that there is something about them resistant to analysis. The fact that Socrates tries anyway, and that he resorts to poetic language, suggests that poetry may not be a second-best discourse so much as the only one available. We have already seen in Chapter One how gestalt thought resists analysis and language. I suspect that Plato intuited something of this problem: how to write about meaningful experiences of truth without distorting or rendering them meaningless—how to insist on real external truths than cannot be analytically proven.

### **§3, Plato and Gestalts**

This section will back up the above claim that Plato may have intuited something of the way analytic thought interferes with gestalt insights. My claim is not that Plato was a proto-gestalt theorist or that he understood the problem in the same way as 20th-century German psychologists. But even with different terms and schemata and goals, it is plausible that Plato and gestalt theory are knocking on the same problem of how to think and talk about meaningful experiences without betraying those experiences.

Max Wertheimer wanted to figure out how to encourage the sort of gestalt shifts that would lead to what he called “productive thinking.” We now know from Jonathan Schooler and other contemporary gestalt researchers that there is no single program or language to facilitate gestalt shifts. Wertheimer did, however, divide the problem into two parts: the negative and the positive.<sup>32</sup> He noticed that unschooled children were often better productive thinkers than thoughtful and educated adults. Wolfgang Köhler, another

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<sup>32</sup> Wertheimer 1959.

gestalt theorist, points out a similar phenomenon in the history of science and mathematics where innovative figures must often wrestle with the constrictions of an extant paradigm before landing on a breakthrough.<sup>33</sup> Wertheimer's conclusion is that insight involves clearing away the clutter of ingrained habit and ways of seeing (the negative process) followed by an attempt to perceive the "inner relations" between a clear and unclear situation (the positive process).<sup>34</sup> Once we clear away the cognitive clutter and perceive one situation, call it *X*, we need to then see how the inner structure of *X* might match that of *Y*, a situation that is still unclear. In many of the Platonic dialogues we find a similar two-step process aiming at insight: *elenchus* (negative) and *dialektikē* (positive).<sup>35</sup>

Socrates is notorious around Athens for his *elenkhos* ("refutation, cross-examination"), his critical questioning that aims to show people that they do not know what they think they know. In other words, it is a negative attempt to clear away cognitive clutter. The Platonic dialogues use the word *doxa* ("expectation, opinion, judgment") for this cognitive clutter, the sedimented values and beliefs (true or false) of a society.<sup>36</sup> Socrates is famous for using questions to get the Athenian people to recognize that many of their beliefs at best make no sense and at worst outright contradict. He prods them to abandon *doxa* in favor of something true, to give up mere opinion in favor of knowledge.

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<sup>33</sup> Köhler 1969, 133–164.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Zwicky 2019, 77, which takes this brilliant observation in a different direction. One big difference is that Zwicky does not hesitate to ascribe doctrinal views to Plato.

<sup>36</sup> *Liddel-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v.



For example, the *Sophist* describes *elenchos* as “the greatest and most effective of purifications.”<sup>37</sup> Over and over Socrates tries to scrape away at *doxa before* going any further in his arguments. Basic classroom experience bears this out: any teacher knows that the greatest impediment to learning is often the biases and troublesome habits of thought students bring in with them.

The positive side of the process is Socrates’ equally famous *dialektikē*, which is described in the dialogues both as a friendly back-and-forth between a more and a less experienced individual or as a method of collection and division.<sup>38</sup> In the *Phaedrus*, dialectic gets special attention:

Εἰς μίαν ἰδέαν συνορῶντα ἄγειν τὰ τολλαχῆ διεσπαρμένα, ἵνα ἕκαστον ὀριζόμενος δῆλον ποιῆ περιὸ ἄν ἀεὶ διδάσκειν ἐθέλη...τὸ πάλιν κατ’ εἴδη δύνασθαι διατέμνειν κατ’ ἄρθα ἧ πέρφυκεν, καὶ μὴ ἐπιχειρεῖν καταγνῶναι μέρος μηδέν, κακοῦ μαγεῖροθ τρόπῳ χρώμενον<sup>39</sup>

First, seeing and gathering together into one form what is originally scattered in order to clarify what you want to explain. Then, making distinct the thing you want to explain. Then, cutting each form along the joints following their natural patterns and trying not to shatter them like some inept butcher.

This description of dialectic resonates with gestalt perception. The idea seems to be that we intuit that some *X* is actually part of some whole *Y*. Then we cultivate more perceptive insight into *X*’s and *Y*’s natures by carefully delineating *Y*’s internal structure. The comparison to a knack or a craft (butchery in the example) is instructive since, like sculpting or baseball or poetry, being a butcher is something that cannot be taught with a

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<sup>37</sup> *Sophist* 253d–e.

<sup>38</sup> *Republic* 359a–d and *Seventh Letter* 344b–c. *Meno* 80d–81e and *Protagoras* 348c–d both describe the method of collection and division without using the exact term *dialektikē*.

<sup>39</sup> *Phaedrus* 265d–e.

straightforward instruction manual.<sup>40</sup> Plato depicts the dialectic process on topics ranging from sophistry, politics, angling, music, and, in the *Phaedrus*, madness and *erōs*.<sup>41</sup> These examples insist that *dialektikē* is not procedural or mechanical. It strives for conceptual clarity, but it does so without any reliable instructions, without any sort of algorithm that would allow different people to arrive at the same categorizations in different circumstances. There is no analytical way to intuit the groupings between *X* and *Y*—in other words, dialectic requires the perception of non-piecemeal wholes.

*“But you’ve gone to great lengths to say that gestalt insights and language clash, that language even inhibits gestalt insights. Doesn’t Socratic dialectic take place in language? In conversation? How can it be a kind of gestalt perception?”* Two points here. First, dialectic and dialogue are not the same thing: I suspect that someone could think dialectically in their own head without talking to another person.<sup>42</sup> Plato writes dramatic dialogues in which characters talk, so dialectic often ends up voiced. Second, however, nothing is pure, and I am not saying that Socratic dialectic *is* gestalt thought—but there are striking affinities. In Chapter One I quoted W.V.O. Quine because he failed to justify logic on logical grounds and instead had to intuitively gesture to the rightness of the enterprise. That’s an appeal to a gestalt. Even in the most analytic logic, there is some gestalt. We also often have to focus on a single element (analysis) or follow a chain of reasoning in order to arrive at the bigger picture. Human thought is complex, it’s not an either/or thing. We are linguistic creatures, and so

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<sup>40</sup> Chapter Six deals with this topic at greater length in the skill stories of the *Zhuangzi*.

<sup>41</sup> Respectively, *Sophist* 221c–223b, 222c–226a, 264e–268d; *Statesman* 267a–c; *Sophist* 218e–221c; *Philebus* 16d–17e; *Phaedrus* 244a–245c and 249d–e.

<sup>42</sup> See Tracy 2020, chapter 13 on this point.

when we have a gestalt perception, we will try and express it linguistically. I think Socrates' dialectic is an attempt to get his interlocutors to see what he sees, and he uses every tool in the toolkit including logic and language. But this logical dissection itself cannot account for the dialectical intuitions that prompt us to see similarities, what Wertheimer calls the "inner relations" among conceptual structures.<sup>43</sup>

What I'm trying to say is that there is more going on in Socratic dialectic than just logical dissection. Dialectic is often upheld as the quintessential Socratic art, but it is usually understood in terms of analytic thought, a linguistic truth procedure. The landmark study on dialectic for decades was Richard Robinson's 1941 *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, which treats dialectic as a purely logical method of constructing arguments.<sup>44</sup> Francisco Gonzalez views dialectic as "a form of argument" and insists that we understand it "as the exchange of questions and answers."<sup>45</sup> Allan Silverman treats dialectic as a method for discovering and then defending metaphysical systems across the dialogues.<sup>46</sup> Gilbert Ryle exemplifies orthodox interpretations of Plato when he writes that Plato's "captivation by the Theory of Forms was...itself in part derivative from his devotion to dialectic."<sup>47</sup> Here not only do we have someone who sees in Plato literal metaphysical Forms but who would also subsume all the complexity of the dialogues to a commitment to dialectical method. James S. Murray describes dialectic as a philosophical

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<sup>43</sup> The wording here is purposeful: gestalt insights *just are* perceptions of shapes (i.e., structures).

<sup>44</sup> Robinson 1941.

<sup>45</sup> González 1998, 1 and 2.

<sup>46</sup> Silverman 2002.

<sup>47</sup> Ryle 1966, 102.

method of argument explicitly opposed to the sophistical method of argument: antilogic, or *antilogikē*.<sup>48</sup> G.R.F. Ferrari sensitively attends to the *Phaedrus*'s literary dimensions but only does so in order to get at the supposed systematic philosophy beneath. He identifies dialectic and myth as two opposed methods in the text, but again limits dialectic to a kind of argumentative mode over and against a non-logical mythic mode.<sup>49</sup> Charles Griswold agrees with other scholars “that dialectic...is the same as dialogue; and that this is inseparable from knowledge of ignorance” and “that Platonic dialectic is the process of oral question and answer.”<sup>50</sup> This view, however, fails to give dialogue its due as a distinct dramatic genre.<sup>51</sup>

So dialectic is almost always seen as a form of logical argument, an explicitly followable method, a sort of logically “good” talking as opposed to “bad” talking, and so on.<sup>52</sup> But look at this passage from the *Republic*:

καὶ διαλεκτικὸν καλεῖς τὸν λόγον ἐκάστου λαμβάνοντα τῆς οὐσίας; καὶ τὸν μὴ ἔχοντα, καθ' ὅσον ἂν μὴ ἔχη λόγον αὐτῶν τε καὶ ἄλλω διδόναι, κατὰ τοσοῦτον νοῦν περὶ τούτου οὐ φήσεις ἔχειν;<sup>53</sup>

And don't we call 'dialectician' the man able to grasp the principle [*ton logon*] of being [*tēs ousias*]? And wouldn't you say that the man *unable* to do this, who is *unable* to give an account to himself and others—wouldn't you say that he lacks full intelligence?

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<sup>48</sup> Murray 1988.

<sup>49</sup> Ferrari 1987, esp. 34. This sort of argument also needs correction from good recent work that troubles any neat contrast between “irrational *muthos*” and “rational *logos*.” See Laks 2018 for an example.

<sup>50</sup> Griswold 1986, 284.

<sup>51</sup> Tracy 2020, chapter 13.

<sup>52</sup> Graeme Nicholson comes somewhat closer to my view in arguing that “dialectic is not only a technical operation; it has a moral and personal meaning, an existential meaning, for Plato” (Nicholson 1999, 56).

<sup>53</sup> *Republic* 534b.

Socrates does not say that dialectic is just one method of argument among many—he says that someone who cannot grasp or perceive essential wholes *lacks intelligence*. “Intelligence” here is *noos*, a psychological faculty in Ancient Greek with a range of meanings: “intelligence, mind, thought and perception, to have sense, intent, the seat of feeling and thoughts, reason.”<sup>54</sup> In the dialogues, Plato employs all these meanings, including using *noos* in a way that involves feelings, emotions, memory, and perceptions.<sup>55</sup> The passage continues to describe someone without dialectical skill:

οὔτε αὐτὸ τὸ ἀγαθὸν φήσεις εἶδέναι τὸν οὕτως ἔχοντα οὔτε ἄλλο ἀγαθὸν οὐδέν<sup>56</sup>

The one who lacks this skill, you will say, does not know the good itself nor any other particular good.

So dialectical ability is linked with the ability to perceive the good, to see and think about quality, not merely logical groupings.

*“Well, now you’re just begging the question. Orthodox Platonism agrees that dialectic is necessary to know the Good, but it’s because only soundly reasoned argument can claim to be knowledge.”*

But this view of dialectic fails to account for the intuitive grouping of wholes and parts that Socrates describes in the *Phaedrus*. If dialectic (1) requires intuitive perceptions and (2) involves the perception of moral qualities, then it *can’t* be strictly logical or rational. Perception is not rational—it’s just perception.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *LSJ*, s.v.

<sup>55</sup> *Republic* 344d, 490a, and 619b; *Timaeus* 51d and 68b; *Gorgias* 504d; *Euthyphro* 3e; *Laws* 887e.

<sup>56</sup> *Republic* 534c.

<sup>57</sup> Of course perception as a biological process can be rationally understood. The act and experience of perceiving, however, is neither rational nor irrational.

So there is something gestalt about dialectic because it involves perceiving wholes, intuiting groupings that cannot really be explained logically. Just after the butcher analogies in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says the following:

τούτων δὴ ἔγωγε αὐτός τε ἐραστής, ὦ Φαῖδρε, τῶν διαιρέσεων καὶ συναγωγῶν, ἵνα οἶός τε ὦ λέγειν τε καὶ φρονεῖν: ἐάν τέ τιν' ἄλλον ἠγήσωμαι δυνατὸν εἰς ἓν καὶ ἐπὶ πολλὰ πεφυκόθ' ὄραν, τοῦτον διώκω κατόπισθε μετ' ἴχνιον ὥστε θεοῖο. καὶ μέντοι καὶ τοὺς δυναμένους αὐτὸ δρᾶν εἰ μὲν ὀρθῶς ἢ μὴ προσαγορεύω, θεὸς οἶδε, καλῶ δὲ οὖν μέχρι τοῦδε διαλεκτικούς.<sup>58</sup>

I myself am a lover, Phaedrus, of these divisions and gatherings, because of how they enable me to speak and think. And if someone is able to see how things cohere as one and divide into many, then I follow him as if following in the footsteps of a god. And these folks who can see this way? I call them dialecticians, though god knows whether rightly or not.

Socrates elevates dialectic power to godliness. Notice that Socrates does not *ask* a skilled dialectician *how* to do it. He just follows them. The language here is instructive. The verb *diōkō* means “follow, pursue, chase, hunt, seek.”<sup>59</sup> Sappho uses a variant of the word in a dialogic poem between herself and Aphrodite, where the love goddess proclaims that Sappho’s beloved “shall follow,” giving the word a sense of manic, love-crazed pursuit.<sup>60</sup> Plato uses the word in a similarly erotic sense in the *Theaetetus*, and it appears in other dialogues in the context of pursuing ideals or truths.<sup>61</sup> Socrates admits to obsession of a near erotic kind with the person able to grasp wholes. (Poetic philosophy—thinking in love with clarity.)

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<sup>58</sup> *Phr.* 266b–c.

<sup>59</sup> *LSJ*, s.v.

<sup>60</sup> Sappho *No. 1*: ...καὶ γὰρ αἰ φεύγει, ταχέως διώξει...

<sup>61</sup> *Theaetetus* 168a, *Phaedrus* 251a, *Gorgias* 480c, *Republic* 454a.

Also instructive is Plato's quoting Homer in this passage. The line "as if following in the footsteps of a god" comes from the *Odyssey* Book 5, when Odysseus is finally to be freed from the Calypso's amorous arms on order of Zeus. He doesn't believe her at first, but eventually, the sorceress convinces him that he can go free, and

ὥς ἄρα φωνήσασ' ἠγήσατο δῖα θεάων  
καρπαλίμως· ὁ δ' ἔπειτα μετ' ἴχνια βαῖνε, θεοῖο.<sup>62</sup>

So saying, [Calypso] quickly led the way,  
and [Odysseus] followed in the footsteps of the goddess.

Is there any significance to Plato's intertextuality here? I like to think so. Odysseus has been trapped with Calypso for years, presumed dead to most in the greater world. He spends his nights with the goddess against his will and his days staring out at the sea weeping. He follows in the footsteps of the goddess here pursuing his last thread of hope, a promise (Calypso has just made divine vows of honesty) of his salvation. Plato knew this, as he knew his Homer.<sup>63</sup> For Socrates, finding someone who can perceive coherent wholes and distinct pluralities is akin to Odysseus finding out that Calypso is going to save him. In the myth of the soul, Socrates mentions that only the gods can gaze steadfastly upon the Forms, so it's no surprise that someone with fluent command of dialectics should be described as divine here. Plato simultaneously shows us the allure and the impossibility of it—nobody can perceive coherent wholes all the time. This is why criticisms like the one from Werner that degrade poetry to a second-best discourse

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<sup>62</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 5.192–193.

<sup>63</sup> Hunter 2012, Planink 2003, and Cavarero 2002.

because it only gives us imperfect images are toothless: imperfect images are all we have anyway. Our finite mortality means that any truths we glimpse will always be fragmented.

The aim of dialectic and thinking more generally might be the perception of reality rather than the avoidance of error—this is what we lose when we understand dialectic as just a logical method of argument. There is something intuitive about it, which is not to say the skill can't be improved with practice and imitation of others. When we turn to the *Zhuangzi*, we will see that stories and analogies featuring crafts or skills like butchery are often deployed precisely because such skills just *are* intuitive and knack-based. This style of argument is not foreign to Plato, who endlessly deploys craft analogies throughout the dialogues.<sup>64</sup>

The dialogues repeatedly show us, in both *elenchos* and *dialektikē*, that there is no programmable method or system to follow to arrive at truth. Socrates repeatedly uses analogies and leading questions to try and get his interlocutors to see the issue in a different light, which is just about all anyone can do when it comes to gestalt perception. A teacher can highlight certain parts of a poem and try to get students to see the meaningful beauty of it, but at the end of the day, there is no foolproof formula for this. All across the dialogues, characters repeatedly complain about the difficulty of this two-step process, especially the truth-seeking dialectical phase. Curiously, echoing Wertheimer's point about untrained children, in all of the dialogues there are only three

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<sup>64</sup> Raphals 2005.



characters who receive praise for their dialectical insights and they are all relatively young.<sup>65</sup>

Another similarity between Plato and gestalt theory is a sense of compulsion or incorrigibility in the perception of meaning. Gestalt insights are incorrigible (“*I just know they’re sleeping together!*”) Because from an evolutionary perspective, they helped us survive—we were incentivized to pay attention to them. Plato has his own version of incorrigible insights: the *Seventh Letter* says that once philosophical knowledge is kindled in the soul it “sustains itself thereafter.”<sup>66</sup> Socrates also mentions “immortal discourse” in the *Phaedrus* that, once rooted in the soul, will sustain itself forever.<sup>67</sup> The two best examples of this incorrigibility in Plato are beauty and love, both of which are a kind of compulsion whose effects we can compare to gestalt insights.

Beauty in the *Phaedrus* involves *ekplēxis*, the experience of being knocked out of oneself, of losing oneself in contemplation of the beautiful object (a beautiful boy in Socrates’ palinode). Sappho’s *No.31* describes an experience of progressive destruction of the self brought on by beholding the beautiful beloved, echoing the feeling of selflessness that often accompanies a gestalt shift. The failure of Sappho’s physical senses in the poem might also be seen as an inability to use language to explain what’s happening. Perhaps

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. Zwicky 2019, 79.

<sup>66</sup> *Seventh Letter* 241d.

<sup>67</sup> *Phaedrus* 277a: ἐπισήμης λόγους... ὅθεν ἄλλοι ἐν ἄλλοις ἤθεσι φυόμενοι τοῦτ’ ἀεὶ ἀθάνατον παρέχειν ἱκανοί...

even more convincing is a discussion of beauty in the *Symposium*.<sup>68</sup> Diotima, through Socrates, elaborates a complex ascension beginning with the beauty of a particular body and ending with the Form of Beauty itself.<sup>69</sup> Note the similarities with gestalt perception:

ὅς γὰρ ἂν μέχρι ἐνταῦθα πρὸς τὰ ἐρωτικὰ παιδαγωγηθῆι, θεώμενος ἐφεξῆς τε καὶ ὀρθῶς τὰ καλά, πρὸς τέλος ἤδη ἰὼν τῶν ἐρωτικῶν ἐξαιφνης κατόφεται τι θαυμαστὸν τὴν φύσιν καλόν, τοῦτο ἐκεῖνο, ᾧ Σώκρατες, οὐδὲ ἕνεκεν καὶ οἱ ἔμπροσθεν πάντες πόνοι ἦσαν<sup>70</sup>

When someone has been guided thus far in his study of erotics [*ta erōtika*], beholding beautiful things one after another in the proper order, he will suddenly see something awesome and beautiful in its nature—and this, Socrates, is the point of all his earlier labor.

Here again we have the hard work so often described in the dialogues and in gestalt theory, the hard work of truth-seeking, of trying to see how things hang together. We also in this description have sudden awesome insight (*thaumaston*), capable of striking us out of ourselves. This is precisely the effect of beauty Diotima describes: it takes us away from our own egocentric desires and refines them, focusing them on some beautiful and external thing.

It is important to note that in orthodox Platonism, this beautiful and external thing is the Form of Beauty, a transcendent Form that takes precedence over all other earthly beauty. But I do not think that Plato ever fully abandons the particular. Just before Socrates can finish Diotima's teachings, Alcibiades breaks into the party and declaims his own speech on love that is the polar opposite of Diotima's. For Alcibiades, love and

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<sup>68</sup> Any in-depth analysis of the *Symposium* and of Diotima's speech in particular is beyond my scope. For a good overview and commentary with careful attention to detail, see Strauss 2001. See also Most 2005 and Halperin 2005.

<sup>69</sup> *Symposium* 210a–212a.

<sup>70</sup> *Symposium* 210e.

beauty are *only* about desire and attention to a particular body. The goal is not to transcend that body towards something more abstract. After Alcibiades, the dialogue more or less ends, suggesting a hint on Plato's part that abstraction is not necessarily correlated with truth, that perhaps we must find truth in particulars. (Contrast this with modern professional philosophy's seamless association of truth and abstraction.) This suggestion is elaborated in the *Phaedrus*, as I have shown in Chapter Two. The *Phaedrus* shows us that beauty and truth and the good life are available without abandoning individuals and particulars. This is *not* because particulars are *better* than abstractions but rather because particulars *gesture towards* abstractions. Without particulars there are no forms to do the gesturing. Without beautiful bodies and flowers and buildings there is no beauty. Nobody ever walks down the street and stops dead after being struck by the abstract notion of the beautiful (*to kalon*): we *are* perhaps led to ponder "the beautiful" *after* encountering a particular beautiful person or song or painting. To be beautiful is to also have a form. And poetic philosophy seeks out resonant forms, forms that strike us as meaningful. The experience of beauty captures something of this striking effect.<sup>71</sup>

*Erōs* also has some qualities of an incorrigible gestalt shift in the *Phaedrus*. Socrates only begins the palinode, the true *logos* about *erōs*, after he is struck by divine inspiration (from his *daimonion*): he is not led to his insights about *erōs* via logical argument or persuasion from Phaedrus. *Erōs* is important especially because it is the only thing that

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<sup>71</sup> Scarry 1999, itself a beautiful meditation, explores beauty and its powers in this area.

Socrates ever confesses to knowing (*ta erōtika*, “erotic things”).<sup>72</sup> In the *Symposium* and the *Protagoras*, Socrates is a well known lover of young men.<sup>73</sup> The *Phaedrus*, as I already mentioned in the previous chapter, also intimates the role of love in Socrates’ determination to rescue Phaedrus from sophistic moral decay. I think that Socrates’ maniacal (literal mania in the *Phaedrus*) pursuit of truth and wisdom (sometimes represented as Forms), is erotic.<sup>74</sup> In the *Symposium*, we learn from Diotima that *Erōs* is the offspring of the gods Poverty (*Penia*) and Resourcefulness (*Poros*) and as such is constantly seeking what he does not have, what he, by his nature, *cannot* have.<sup>75</sup> The philosopher is like *Erōs* insofar as he lacks wisdom but desires it (*philo* + *sophia*, “love of wisdom”). Socrates so craved wisdom to the exclusion of other concerns that he was eventually put to death by Athens, a more extreme version of the frustration we all feel towards a friend newly fallen in love. The *Phaedrus* most explicitly describes *erōs* as the driving force behind philosophy: *erōs* is what pulls us towards the Forms, *erōs* is what keeps Socrates focused and on track. When the search gets difficult, when the Athenians imprison you and try force you into giving up philosophy, *erōs* is what sustains you. Love of wisdom makes us brave, makes us persevere, makes us give a damn about truth.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> There is good evidence from Xenophon that the association of Socrates and *ta erōtika* is not only a Platonic invention (see, Xenophon *Memoirs* 2.6.28, 3.11.16, and 4.1.2). Kahn 1996 also points out that the “theme of Socratic *eros*... is the topic most fully represented” in all surviving material about Socrates (4).

<sup>73</sup> Boyarin 2009 has a good discussion of Socrates’ queerness in this scene.

<sup>74</sup> Nicholson 1999 and Sinaiko 1965 are good discussions of the role of love in the Platonic dialogues, and both deal specifically with the *Phaedrus*.

<sup>75</sup> *Symposium* 203b–204b.

<sup>76</sup> In this way, the defining difference between Socrates and the sophists he often confronts might be love. The sophists, to be blunt, just don’t give a damn about truth, the don’t love it.

This giving a damn about or loving truth highlights a final affinity between Plato and gestalt theory. Wertheimer talks about something called “directedness” that is “a place toward which the attention is directed.”<sup>77</sup> He writes the following:

Just as a task, a problem situation in productive thinking, is not something closed within itself, but tends toward its solution, its structural completion, so even a task with its solution is often not a thing by itself. It again may function as a part that points beyond itself, striving to envisage, to clarify a broader field.<sup>78</sup>

This description of directedness applies to the experience of the Forms as depicted in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. I defined poetic philosophy as thinking in love with clarity. An *erōs* for clarity is a desire to be struck by resonance. What resounds? Integrated forms. What do we call the perception of an integrated form? Gestalt perception. What is a gestalt? A shape or a form. So poetic philosophy is a desire for form—specifically a kind of *erōs*, an all-consuming, maddening desire. A lover of clarity would be someone who might understandably develop a desire for coherent truth, a desire to see how things hang together. This person might feel unease or even unbearable discomfort at details that don’t fit, by facts or elements that do not seem to cohere. I think this a terrific way to understand the figure of Socrates. Consider how often he seems compelled towards the truth, how he behaves as if madly in love with the Forms. I propose that Socrates is someone who is good at gestalt comprehension. He routinely professes discomfort and agitation at not having an adequate answer to a question. His intolerance for contradiction is legendary. He practices *elenkhos* and *dialektikē*, uses leading questions and

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<sup>77</sup> Wertheimer 1959, 228.

<sup>78</sup> Wertheimer 1924, 141.

deploys analogies all to try and shift perspectives, to try and grasp wholes. Socrates is a person who is deeply bothered by the pieces not fitting, by not seeing the whole picture.

So the process of acquiring knowledge that Plato depicts across many of the dialogues is intriguingly illuminated by comparison to gestalt theory. The comparison is imperfect to be sure (what comparison isn't?), but the similarities are compelling:<sup>79</sup>

- Plato and gestalt theory describe thinking as a two-step process: clearing away of cognitive clutter followed by a truth-seeking attempt to see inner structures of a situation or idea.
- For Socrates in Plato, perceiving structure aims at grasping a Form, while in gestalt theory, perceiving structure aims at seeing a solution or insight.
- Dialectic as collection and division in Plato involves a kind of intuition and inexpressible know-how that gestalt psychologists associate with insightful breakthroughs.
- Both lack any kind of algorithmic, analyzable procedure.
- Both involve heavy reliance on analogies and guiding questions—“*try looking at it like this...*”
- Plato and gestalt theorists both emphasize the difficulty of truth-seeking and perceiving inner structure.
- From the *Seventh Letter* and from recent research, Plato and gestalt theorists both emphasize how language is either unsuited or antithetical to experiencing meaning.

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<sup>79</sup> Repurposed from the list in Zwicky 2019, 79.

(This helps explain the torqued poetic language of the *Phaedrus*: language that reaches and contorts to make the impossible attempt.)

- Plato's compulsions of beauty and love share something of gestalt insights' incorrigibility.
- In the case of love especially, Plato echoes gestalt theory's idea of directedness: a phenomenon of compelled attention to something beyond oneself.

#### **§4, Conclusion**

I have now explained what I mean by truth: the perception of coherent wholes, an experience that alerts us to meaningful things in the world. Of all the affinities between Plato and gestalt theory, the most crucial ones going forward are the last two: the compelling directedness, articulated in Plato so often as beauty and love, a focused attentiveness to something outside the self. The question is this: *what are we paying attention to outside of ourselves?* And the answer is that we are paying attention to the Forms.

Plato the metaphysician is given dubious credit for a “two realms” doctrine: the Forms are what is real, and they exist apart from us mortals down in the world of impermanence and imitation. Orthodox Plato does not deny that things in this world exist (tables, political systems, human bodies) but thinks they are less real than the Forms. Aristotle, I think, is not entirely wrong when he says that Plato inherits a problem of constant change from Heraclitus—*how can we all use the same words and concepts in different ways and yet still somehow manage to come across as meaningful to each other?* Think of the word “beautiful” in different contexts: we can speak of a beautiful serve in tennis, a beautiful painting, a beautiful person or soul, or something that has nothing to do with humans like

a beautiful mountain ridge. One way of understanding Plato is that he was trying to figure out what all these uses of the word “beauty” have in common, he was trying to show that when we use the word “beauty” we are not just projecting our own views onto the world—rather, we are seeing something true about the world.

This suggests that the aim of Plato’s philosophy is not to secure thinking from error but “to understand, to discern the lineaments of reality.”<sup>80</sup> To think is to try and see what’s there. So what’s there? Forms. And where is “*there*”? Well, one way of describing the whole history of European philosophy after Plato is an attempt to deal with this question. One camp called “realism” holds that truth and justice and so on *really exist*. In Platonism, these things exist as Forms, paradigms of pure being in a hyperuranian realm apart from but the template for our own. Another camp called “nominalism” claims that things like moral truths are actually human constructions, usually linguistic ones.<sup>81</sup> Plato is typically held to be the arch-representative of realism, but such a view understands him as laying out literal Forms that float around somewhere. I claim that the Forms are not meant to be literally taken this way, *but* I still think Plato is a realist.

So, the Forms are real and external to us but not literal metaphysical objects. What are they, then? Metaphors. How can metaphors be true? If we understand truth as a coherence, as something to be experienced as harmony rather than analytically verified. The next chapter will lay out my theory of metaphor based on the coherence truth

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<sup>80</sup> Zwicky 2019, 95.

<sup>81</sup> For good work dealing with these nominalist issues as they relate to Plato and postmodernism, see Hyland 2004 and Shankman 1994. Rorty 2016 is also a good, short summation of these views (although his is a strongly orthodox reading of Plato).



argued for in this chapter. And because I define metaphor as a type of gestalt insight, I hope my comparison of Plato to gestalt theory will further reinforce the idea that the Forms are metaphors.

## CHAPTER IV

### MURDOCH & METAPHYSICAL METAPHORS

In the Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd :  
Petals on a wet, black bough .

Ezra Pound

The authentic and pure values—truth, beauty, and goodness—in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object. Teaching should have no aim but to prepare, by training the attention, for the possibility of such an act. All the other advantages of instruction are without interest.<sup>1</sup>

Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστὶν τε καὶ εἶναι

What is for meaning is for being too.

Parmenides, D-K. Fr.3

### §1, Iris Murdoch

This chapter builds on the previous chapter's descriptions of truth as the experience of a resonantly coherent form—in other words, as a gestalt perception. The Forms are not a literal systematic theory but metaphors that Plato uses to direct our attention to meaningful experiences of truth in the world. This chapter will first lay out my theory of metaphor, then apply it to Platonic metaphysics, showing that metaphysics are not literal descriptions of metaphorical gestures. I will end with a brief reading of the *Parmenides* that reinterprets it not as a critique of a systematic Theory of Forms but as a

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<sup>1</sup> Weil 1952, 120.

dramatic depiction of what happens when we try break down metaphors via analysis. My reading throughout is guided by Iris Murdoch's brilliant work.

Murdoch across her various writings presents a coherent (though not systematic) view of Plato. I begin with this pithy remark: "It must be kept in mind that Plato is talking in metaphysical metaphors, myths, images; there is no Platonic 'elsewhere', similar to the Christian 'elsewhere'."<sup>2</sup> This is striking because it takes aim at two notions so widespread that they are seldom questioned: that Plato believes in some metaphysical reality and that metaphysics is not literal. To get into all this, some general remarks about Murdoch's thought will be useful.<sup>3</sup>

Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* takes as its central problem the question of how abstract thought relates to lived life, how theory relates to practice. She writes:

The problem about philosophy, and about life, is how to relate large impressive illuminating general conceptions to the mundane...details of ordinary personal private existence...How do the generalisations of philosophers connect with what I am doing in my day-to-day and moment-to-moment pilgrimage, how can metaphysics be a guide to morals?<sup>4</sup>

The *Phaedrus* dramatizes this tension between abstraction and particularity, between flights of theoretical fancy (myth of the immortal soul) and ordinary experience (seeing a

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<sup>2</sup> Murdoch 1992, 399. The standard collection of Murdoch's essays is *Existentialists and Mystics*, edited by Peter Conradi in 1997. Because the individual essays cover a wide range of publication dates (1950–1997), I will simply refer to this 1997 collection. The exception is the standalone book *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992).

<sup>3</sup> I limit my remarks here to material germane to the present conversation—though much of what I say is essential to Murdoch's philosophy, it is far beyond the present scope to give anything like an introduction to Murdoch.

<sup>4</sup> Murdoch 1992, 146.

beautiful person).<sup>5</sup> She sees the problem with metaphysics thus: "...how far conceptualizing and theorizing, which from one point of view are absolutely essential, in fact divide you from the thing that is the object of theoretical attention."<sup>6</sup> As anyone who has read professional philosophy knows, the construction of elaborate metaphysical theories has the oft-neglected side-effect of obscuring the thing we theorize about, removing us from the immediate experience of it.

*"If metaphysics gets in the way of actual experience, why bother with it at all?"* We are driven towards metaphysics as a way of imposing unity on our lives, which have no inherent unity or form (or, alternatively, we try to see a gestalt or form in our existence because it just feels good). Murdoch describes two major functions of the human mind that correspond to gestalt perception: thought is both one-making and truth-seeking. The mind is one-making in that it takes what we encounter as fragmentary and random and tries to make sense of it. Gestalt theory holds that we perceive wholes *before* parts, that elements are an aftereffect of analysis. Murdoch would not disagree: she is not saying that we *only* experience reality in piecemeal and then try to fit it together. She is saying that we often encounter *fragments* (her word). A fragment already belongs to a whole when we encounter it, and when we perceive that whole, we are not inventing it ourselves piece by piece but rather coming to see how the fragment *already* belongs to a meaningful form. Think of the archaeologist who unearths a vase fragment. The fragment is understood

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<sup>5</sup> Murdoch uses "metaphysics" to refer broadly to abstract theorizing, usually the sort that results in systematic or unifying structures and ideas.

<sup>6</sup> Murdoch 1963, 65.

*only in relation to the whole* of which it is a part.<sup>7</sup> The mind is also, Murdoch thinks, truth-seeking in that it has a fundamental orientation towards the real. Murdoch herself does not fully explain this remark, but gestalt theory can help. A truth-seeking mind is one that constantly tries to see how things cohere. The neuroscience is clear enough that a part of our cognition does indeed grasp for coherent patterns or gestalts, so understanding truth as coherence explains quite nicely Murdoch's remark that consciousness is truth-seeking. (I return to this aspect of Murdoch below in her theory of attention.)

So metaphysics can sometimes get in the way of actual experience, but we do it anyway because our minds crave unity and form, because we want to impose gestalts on existence. We also cannot abandon analytic thought and logic, as Murdoch herself points out: "There are times for piecemeal analysis, modesty and commonsense, and other times for ambitious synthesis and the aspiring and edifying charm of lofty and intricate structures."<sup>8</sup> We have seen this tension in the *Phaedrus*, the "lofty and intricate structures" of the myth of the immortal soul along with the experience of the beautiful body of the individual beloved. The good life, we have seen, is described not in abstractions but in terms of a loving sexual relationship between two unique individuals that is fragile: "this best human life [in the *Phaedrus*] is unstable, always prey to conflict."<sup>9</sup> In other words, the good life lacks the stability of theoretical metaphysics. This also aligns with what I

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<sup>7</sup> Recall Michael Wertheimer's remark that "parts do not become parts, do not function as parts, until there is a whole of which they are parts."

<sup>8</sup> Murdoch 1992, 211.

<sup>9</sup> Nussbaum 1986, 221.

described above: analytic thought insulates us against error at the cost of robbing us of meaningful, truthful insights (i.e., gestalt perceptions).

Another general affinity between Murdoch and poetic philosophy is integration. Maria Antonaccio claims that what's at stake in Murdoch's writing is "the problem of grasping the reality of the individual."<sup>10</sup> In Chapter One, I quoted David Tracy on the idea that theory only manifests in and through practice, and Chapter Two pointed out a tension in the *Phaedrus* between the general and the particular. I think Murdoch is dealing with something similar. The example of a novel is apt considering her career as a novelist. When we read a novel, we grasp an individual in direct proportion to how well they are characterized, how subtly they are drawn in their relations, their desires, disappointments, distinctness. To grasp an individual in real life requires focused attention and a commitment to taking a person on their own terms rather than, for example, subsuming them to prejudice or stereotype. At the same time, grasping the individual requires us to make use of abstraction: to take impressions, singular incidents, gestures, imperfect social encounters—all these fragments must be seen as an explanatory whole.<sup>11</sup> An artwork must maintain the individual singularity of characters or objects while at the same time presenting a unified form, a structure that makes the artwork what it is. The particular must exist in tension with the general, and this holds true in philosophy as well as poetry, as Murdoch explains in a beautiful passage:

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<sup>10</sup> Antonaccio 1996, 112.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Rorty touches on this point when he says that the best way to understand something (a person, an event, etc.) is not with a list of disconnected facts about it but with a narrative. See Rorty 2016.

The question, at what level of generality am I to operate? is of course one which faces both the artist and the philosopher. Great discoveries are made at great levels of generality, as when Plato subjects the profound idea that no one errs willingly to a number of transformations within a general picture of the human soul as knower and agent. On the other hand, the lack of detail can leave the reader unconvinced that he is really seeing ‘human life’ and not the ‘ghostly pallet of bloodless categories’...The explanation of our fallibility in such matters as seeing the worse as the better is more informatively (though of course less systematically) carried out by poets, playwrights, and novelists. It has taken philosophy a long time to acknowledge this.<sup>12</sup>

I suspect that Plato acknowledged all this long ago, that the torqued unity of the dramatic dialogues is his way of representing what Murdoch calls our fallibility (“fragility” for Nussbaum, “imperfection” for me) while still grappling with the human need to unify and systematize—to be metaphysicians. The poet and the philosopher both try to unify and find a form that sometimes seems impossible in real life while also remaining loyal to the chaotic contingency of mortality.

Murdoch helps us cast some of the insights of gestalt theory in more philosophical terms. She does not deny that metaphysics is important and that it is a natural human activity. What she does warn us about is the tendency to get lost in the “ghostly ballet of bloodless categories” and lose sight of the actual lived experience behind it. I illustrated how Plato avoids this fate in the *Phaedrus* by threading his text with allusions to Sappho and her erotic, earthly concerns. With these general remarks on Murdoch, we now return to the opening point of this chapter: “there is no Platonic elsewhere” and Plato is dealing in “metaphysical metaphors.” In what follows, I present my own theory of metaphor drawing on Murdoch and on Jan Zwicky.

## §2, Metaphor

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<sup>12</sup> Murdoch 1997, 457.

What can Murdoch mean by calling Plato's metaphysics metaphorical? It has something to do with the way humans think.

The development of consciousness in human beings is inseparably connected with the use of metaphor. Metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition: metaphors of space, metaphors of movement, metaphors of vision...it seems to me impossible to discuss certain kinds of concepts without resort to metaphor, since the concepts are themselves deeply metaphorical and cannot be analysed into non-metaphorical components without a loss of substance.<sup>13</sup>

Metaphor is fundamental to human thought. We think through metaphors, Murdoch says, because we have no other way to think. She notes that in modern philosophy metaphorical constructions like Plato's are victimized by ruthless formal logic and hammered into explicit systems, which results in "a loss of substance." This is precisely the sort of behavior poetic philosophy seeks to avoid.

Metaphor is a species of gestalt thought, and because gestalt thought is the background of poetic philosophy, metaphor is thus essential to poetic philosophy. Gestalt insights can take one of two forms: (1) what we thought was chaos suddenly dissolves or organizes into an ordered whole, or (2) we come to see or understand one thing in terms of another thing—metaphor is this latter sort, what Wittgenstein calls "seeing as."<sup>14</sup> I have argued that gestalt thinking is a fundamental mode of thought, and so this would make metaphor also fundamental to thought, to meaning, and to truth.

The notion that metaphor is essential to thought is not so new—the last four decades have seen a steady stream of work on metaphors across many fields in the

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<sup>13</sup> Murdoch 1997, 363.

<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein 1953, II, xi.



humanities.<sup>15</sup> While some work has been done in early and comparative philosophy on metaphors, my argument here goes in a different direction.<sup>16</sup> The seminal *Metaphors We Live By* of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson made one of the first impactful cases for the importance of metaphor as a basic feature of human thought. Of particular value for my poetic philosophy is that Lakoff and Johnson emphasize that our metaphoric cognition arises from our experience as bodily creatures. For example, it is nearly impossible to think about abstract concepts like space and time without resorting to what they call “conceptual metaphors,” and “[t]hese spatial orientations arise from the fact that we have bodies of the sort we have and that they function as they do in our physical environment.”<sup>17</sup> Work on conceptual metaphor is important, and I have no quarrel with it, but I want to emphasize something different: the purposeful, even artistic deployment of metaphors as attempts to say something real about the world.

By metaphor I mean any kind of focused and purposeful analogical thinking that gets expressed in language.<sup>18</sup> What makes my interest in metaphors different from cognitive theory is the “focused and purposeful” bit. Metaphors are focused in that they are attempts to solve a problem, namely, the problem of meaning (more on this soon). Metaphors are purposeful in that they are not things we just happen to use as embodied

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<sup>15</sup> *Metaphors We Live By* by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) is the watershed text here. See also Fauconnier and Turner 2002, Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Damasio 1994, and Lakoff and Turner 1989.

<sup>16</sup> Slingerland 2003 is the major text introducing metaphor into comparative philosophy. See also Slingerland 2004 and 2011. Raphals 2015 contains a good overview of recent work on metaphor in comparative philosophy. Most of this scholarship applies work in metaphor to specific topics in Chinese philosophy, most often the problem of mind-body dualism.

<sup>17</sup> Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Zwicky 2003, §5.

creatures—as in the conceptual metaphor that uses space to understand time (e.g., yesterday is behind me, tomorrow is before me). I am emphasizing metaphors as intentional creations by specific people for certain tasks. Further, metaphor in my theory here is specifically linguistic, whereas for conceptual metaphor theory, it is more than that.<sup>19</sup> The linguistic expression need not necessarily take the form “*x* is *y*” so long as it is analogical: thus similes and analogies count as metaphors in my sense regardless of how they are actually phrased. In order for something to be a metaphor, “*x* is *y*” must be, strictly speaking, untrue. “Juliet is the sun” is a metaphor because Romeo is trying to express something (purposeful) about a particular experience (focused). And, of course, Juliet is *not* the sun. If she were, this could not be a metaphor.

Metaphor is a type of gestalt perception in which we see one thing in terms of another. Something unclear suddenly strikes us as meaningful when we place it in relation to something else that is already clear. Or, two unclear things both become clear when juxtaposed. (The previous chapter touched on this effect in Platonic dialectic.) Zwicky draws attention to the idea that to recognize (re-cognize) a thing is to re-think it, to think about it differently.<sup>20</sup> We seldom even use the word “recognize” unless in the context of some problem. We do not recall what he looks like, or we haven’t seen him in years and he has aged, or the room is too dimly lit. Recognition “involves re-organization of experience—an act of contextualization, a sensing of connexions between aspects of

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<sup>19</sup> Again, at the risk of being misunderstood, I don’t disagree with conceptual metaphor theory. I am just trying to emphasize something else.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, §1.

immediate experience and other experiences.”<sup>21</sup> In the above example, the problem is not recognizing someone, and the solution is to change the context (turn on a light, remind us of when we first met, etc.). When this process is done with an analogy and put into language, the result is metaphor. My claim is that metaphors help us to recognize. But recognize what?

Because gestalt insights resist language, metaphor, as a type of gestalt shift, is also a form of resistance to language. Gestalt shifts are what happen when we do perceive meaning/coherence but are not necessarily able to render our insight in language. When—despite the failure of language to capture gestalts—we try anyway, the result is metaphor. When Romeo says “*Juliet is the sun*” there is a gap. Romeo apprehends something of the significance, the meaning of Juliet to him, but this significance is ineffable so he resorts to a comparison. There is a gap between the world with its meanings and language. Metaphors are not this gap but they do illuminate it. If Juliet were the sun, this would be a statement of fact and not a metaphor. Just as a bell requires emptiness in order to sound, a metaphor requires gaps in order to mean: a superficial gap (Juliet is not the sun) and a profound gap (between the world and language). Metaphor is thus an attempt to overcome the inadequacy of language. A particular metaphor will be more or less successful in this depending on how it strikes us.

*“Alright, so metaphors are a kind of gestalt insight. But that gets you into all sorts of issues with truth and coherence from your gestalt discussion. Are you saying that metaphors are true? What would that*

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

*even mean?*” Metaphors can be true, yes, provided we’re talking about truth as coherence.

Max Wertheimer gives the following description of thinking:

Thinking consists in envisaging, realizing structural features and structural requirements; proceeding in accordance with, and determined by, these requirements; thereby changing the situation...; realizing structural transposability, structural hierarchy, and separating structurally peripheral from fundamental features—a special case of grouping; *looking for structural rather than piecemeal truth*.<sup>22</sup>

There are echoes here of Platonic dialectic (“a special case of grouping”), but I want to focus on how a good metaphor can help us see structural truth. Poetic philosophy, I have argued, attends to things as they are, as integrated forms. A form or a whole is what it is because of the integrated relationships between all the composite parts of that whole. To be struck by (to experience clarity in) a whole or a form is to apprehend how it coheres, how its parts all interrelate. Metaphor allows us to more clearly perceive these structures because it sets one on top of another and invites us to notice the similarities. Saying that “*Juliet is the sun*” is more than a verbal or rhetorical flourish: it is to point out that Juliet and the sun both have very real ontological structures as far as Romeo is concerned—the metaphor gestures at something true.<sup>23</sup>

Zwicky describes metaphors as ontological depth charges, explosive devices that we drop into a dark chasm, hoping that the explosion will illuminate the geological structures beneath.<sup>24</sup> I think this is right. Metaphors illuminate reality itself by showing us

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<sup>22</sup> Wertheimer 1959, 235–236. My italics. See also Zwicky 2003, §3.

<sup>23</sup> Notice as well the importance of perspective. *As far as Romeo is concerned*, Juliet and the sun have similar ontological meanings (he needs both to live, for example). But the metaphor might not be true for Mercutio or Friar Lawrence. This is not to say that all truth is relative but rather to highlight the importance of our situatedness, our particular perspective and attachments and bodies and desires. Truth is not a purely abstract thing—it must anchor somewhere, just as ideas or content cannot exist abstractly but must embody themselves in form.

<sup>24</sup> Zwicky 2015.

how one thing shares the structure of another thing. Like depth charges, metaphors can be powerful or weak, they can reveal more or less depending on their *oomph*. Metaphors rely on a sort of philosophical realism, on the belief that meaning really does exist "out there" somewhere. The reason metaphors work is because they show us something about the world we had not noticed before. The ability to think metaphorically, to understand metaphors—this is a form of sensitivity to what is.<sup>25</sup> As Zwicky puts it: "A metaphor sets one thing beside another and says, 'see, they have the same form.' Which is to say: they make the same gesture; they mean in the same way."<sup>26</sup>

Murdoch seems to view metaphysics in a similar way (and remember—metaphysics *is* metaphor for Murdoch). Metaphysics/metaphor, for Murdoch, arises from "the urge to prove that where we intuit unity there really is unity."<sup>27</sup> Like all gestalt shifts, we have an intuition of wholeness that resists articulation in language but that nevertheless demands expression. Murdoch groups poets and metaphysicians as those who possess the "sheer *nerve*" to try to say something true even when it seems ineffable.<sup>28</sup> She gives the example of "Kant's great structure" that has come under fire in the last fifty years for what many see as a failure to preserve the importance of the individual. She also offers another possibility: "But there is another way which consists of constructing a huge hall of reflection full of light and space and fresh air, in which ideas and intuitions can be

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Zwicky 2003, §6.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., §8.

<sup>27</sup> Murdoch 1997, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Murdoch 1992, 422. Her italics.

unsystematically nurtured.”<sup>29</sup> Expressing truth might take the form of a “great structure” or system like Kant’s, and we cannot deny that analytic thought does often hit on truth. But like Zwicky’s depth charges, we might also use metaphor to build “a huge hall...full of light and space...” In other words, metaphors flash and show us the ontological resonances of the world. Metaphors show us how things cohere. Metaphors show us truth.

Murdoch thinks we should be constantly on alert for the presence of metaphors in Plato:

However, the artist (or is it the philosopher?) in him [Plato] still urges him to explain by using images. ‘Is it a metaphor?’ is of course a fundamental question to be asked about metaphysical explanation, about for instance what we are told in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Phenomenology of Mind*; and indeed such works could not exist at all without the help of metaphor. Plato is right to explain (*Timaeus*, 47 B) that sight (vision) is our greatest blessing, without which we would not reach philosophy. Our ability to use visual structures to understand non-visual structures (as well as other different visual ones) is fundamental to explanation in any field.<sup>30</sup>

We can always ask if something is a metaphor, and metaphors are undoubtedly at play in Kant’s essays (especially conceptual metaphors), but the essays themselves are not obviously constructed as poetic texts the way the Platonic dialogues are. Murdoch’s insistence on vision reinforces the idea that metaphors are a species of gestalt insight, or Wittgenstein’s “seeing as.” We see the structure of one unclear thing in another, clearer thing. Wittgenstein even goes so far as to define philosophy as the realignment of vision, of looking at something *this* way instead of *that* way such that the philosophical problem dissolves. “Seeing as” is, for him, how we do philosophy.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Murdoch 1997, 445.

I explained in Chapter Three that coherence truth does not commit us to an “anything goes” attitude about truth. Meaning is real and objective, waiting to be perceived. In this way, not just any metaphor is true. Just as with gestalt perceptions, metaphors can *misfire* or just *miss* the way things really are. “Seeing as” will not always come with meaningful insight. If metaphors are depth charges, then not all charges detonate, and not all charges reveal something insightful or useful when they do. These non-exploding, dud metaphors might be thought of as clichés—they have lost their ability to shock us into a new perspective.<sup>31</sup> What makes a metaphor powerful? As with all things gestalt, there is no recipe. A powerful or insightful metaphor is a matter of sensitivity to forms. It can be practiced but not programmed.

That said, one sign of a powerful metaphor is that it illuminates not only the gap between the world and language but also both parts of the comparison. A strong metaphor will overlay two forms in a way that makes a difference to our understanding of each one individually. To grasp “*Juliet is the sun*” is to grasp something about Juliet’s role in Romeo’s life: the way in which she creates the very conditions of possibility for his existence—not just figuratively, but as the play shows us, quite literally (when she “dies,” he dies). But we *also* gain a newfound appreciation for the sun, for how it nourishes life itself, for how it provides moral clarity in our actions (like whom we should and should not sword fight), and for its potential lethality. We come away from the metaphor with a newfound perception of the sun, of a beloved, of light, and so on.

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<sup>31</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson phrases it thus: “The etymologist finds the dearest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin” (Emerson 1844, 13).

If metaphor is a charged type of language, language that gestures at a gap, this implies the existence of non-metaphorical language. Here again I depart from recent work on cognitive metaphor which sees the metaphorical nature of almost all our language. I want to distinguish the unnoticed, background metaphors of our everyday cognition and speech from the purposeful, functional metaphors I am describing.<sup>32</sup> The metaphor I am describing only exists in contrast to non-metaphorical language. We must see how ordinary language fails at the task of expressing something in order to try and get the job done with metaphor. Decorated forms in architecture rely on *undecorated* forms to make sense. Or, perhaps a better way to phrase it: even the plainest building has a style, but we only call the most consciously adorned and ornamented parts of it like gargoyles “decorative.” Metaphors work the same way against a backdrop of non-metaphorical language. This doesn’t mean that form is unimportant in non-decorative cases. It just means we don’t always have to resort to resonant forms. As I said in Chapter One, not all forms are integrated: sometimes it’s a house and sometimes it’s just a heap of lumber.

By overlaying two distinct but structurally similar objects, metaphor invites us to make the connection ourselves—that is, metaphor cannot come with exhaustive analysis or explanation. If it could, the metaphor itself would be unnecessary. This is not to say that a metaphor will always be apparent to everyone, far from it. We may need help grasping a metaphor the way we need help grasping all sorts of *gestalts*, but a metaphor cannot be broken down and analyzed while still retaining its power. As Ted Cohen says,

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<sup>32</sup> This is not to say that we don’t need imaginative sensitivity to our everyday, “background” cognitive metaphors.



“[o]ften a paraphrase fails to do the job of its metaphor in much the same way that an explanation fails to replace a joke.”<sup>33</sup> Metaphor has a specific task and cannot be easily replaced. The problem is how to express meaning, how to say something ineffable. Instead of saying it, we gesture. A metaphor is a linguistic gesture, a juxtaposition of two things with an almost desperate hope that someone else will see what we see. To spell it out prosaically is to defuse the explosive power. I can give you a paraphrased, bullet-point summary of a poem sufficient to discuss that poem at a cocktail party, but it robs you of the experience of reading the poem and really feeling it. What does it mean to feel a poem? If you know, you know.

Not all metaphors have power. A metaphor can be weak in at least one of two ways.<sup>34</sup> First, a weak metaphor merely asserts some connection between *X* and *Y* that lacks any resonance—that is, the metaphor is just wrong, the two forms do not actually share any ontological structure. This is like the participants in the gestalt experiment who mistakenly believed that they had perceived some organizing principle behind random arrays. Second, a weak metaphor may hit on ontological similarity but require no leap of the imagination because *X* and *Y* are already too obviously close (something like “the fire hydrant is a fountain” comes to mind). Metaphors rely on us to do the work, as is the case with all gestalt insights. We squint into the gap until the charges explode and then, suddenly, we *see*. But if we are not paying close enough attention, even strong metaphors

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<sup>33</sup> Cohen 1978, 11.

<sup>34</sup> Zwicky 2003.

cannot help us. This is where imagination comes in—imagination as the ability to pay attention to what is real.

### §3, Imagination and Space

“So metaphor requires a leap of imagination? Doesn’t that suggest that metaphor is not real after all? You’re just imagining things. *Juliet isn’t the sun.*” Depends on your understanding of imagination. Murdoch invites us to think of imagination as essential to philosophical thought, and she distinguishes imagination from fantasy:

To mark the distances involved we need, for purposes of discussion, two words for two concepts: a distinction between egoistic *fantasy* and liberated truth-seeking *imagination*... one somewhat mechanically generating narrowly banal false pictures (the ego as all-powerful), and the other freely and creatively exploring the world, moving toward the expression and elucidation (and in art celebration) or what is true and deep.<sup>35</sup>

What we commonly call imagination is actually fantasy, according to Murdoch. Fantasy is egoistic because it pleases us, it makes no attempt to turn our attention outward towards external reality and instead generates self-serving fanciful creations. Imagination tries to “express and elucidate...what is true and deep.” Imagination is a faculty of perception.

The etymology is instructive here. “Imagination” comes from the Latin *imāgināri* (“to picture to oneself, imagine”), but this word is a loan word from the Ancient Greek *phantazesthai* (“make visible or present to the eye”), which itself comes from *phainō* (“to bring to light”).<sup>36</sup> The imagination is a mode of seeing, perceiving, recognizing. Crucially, the idea of bringing something to light means that imagination might be seen as *replacing* an absence or darkness instead of *depending* on an absence to fancifully “imagine”

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<sup>35</sup> Murdoch 1992, 321.

<sup>36</sup> Klein 1966, s.v.

something unreal—this is what Murdoch means by “elucidating.”<sup>37</sup> To imagine is not to create *ex nihilo*.

There is a connection to Plato here via the idea of imagination as a literal kind of imaging (imaging in the sense of an ultrasound imaging and *showing* or *revealing* a body). Murdoch says of images: “Man is a creature who makes images of himself and then comes to resemble the picture.”<sup>38</sup> Humans make images of ourselves, our lives, our world, our beliefs (this is one way to understand the myth of the immortal soul and the discussion of Forms in the *Phaedrus*—more on this soon). Murdoch’s insight is that the images we craft are so powerful that they in turn alter us in deep ways. Thus the affective power of a good metaphor to stop us in our tracks. Like all deep gestalt insights, we *feel* the *oomph* of a metaphor, of an image that was purposefully shaped by someone as it now shapes us. Let’s look at an example of this in Plato.

Book VII of Plato’s *Republic* opens with Socrates inviting Glaucon to partake in a thought experiment:

...ἀπεικασον τοιούτῳ πάθει τὴν ἡμετέραν φύσιν παιδείας τε πέρι καὶ ἀπαιδευσίας. ἰδὲ γὰρ ἀνθρώπους οἷον ἐν καταγείῳ οἰκήσει σπηλαιώδει, ἀναπεπταμένην πρὸς τὸ φῶς τὴν εἴσοδον ἐχούσῃ μακρὰν παρὰ πᾶν τὸ σπήλαιον...<sup>39</sup>

Imagine by likening (*apeikason*) our nature (*phusin*), in its education and in its lack, to a condition (*pathei*) such as this. Imagine (*ide*) human beings as dwelling in a sort of underground cave with a long entrance open to the light across the entire width of the cave.

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Zwicky 2015, 265.

<sup>38</sup> Murdoch 1997: 75. The quotation comes from a collection of Murdoch’s essays titled *Existentialists and Mystics*, edited by Peter Conradi and published in 1997. Because the essays cover a wide range of publication dates (from 1950 through 1997), I cite them as “Murdoch 1997” as per Conradi’s edited collection.

<sup>39</sup> *Rep.* 514a.

Socrates presents Glaucon with a task: first, Glaucon must form an image of human nature (*phusis*). Second, human *phusis* must be imaged by referencing a particular situation, a condition (*pathos*): in this case, the situation of humans dwelling in an underground cavern. Third, before Glaucon can think about *phusis* in a certain *pathos*, he must imaginatively construct a setting. Not only is an image necessary to *begin* investigation of human nature, but the investigation must then *proceed through* images as well. Crucially, what Glaucon is asked to imagine is not a *scene*—Socrates asks Glaucon to imagine an *experience* (*pathos*). Specifically, he asks Glaucon to *see* (*ide*) an experience, but how does one see an experience? Glaucon is asked to see a *pathos* (“condition, mood, affect”)—he is, in other words, asked to image the imageless, asked to visualize the invisible. There is something contradictory, it seems, to seeing human nature.

A brief grammatical point: the word *pathos* relates to the verb *paskhō*: “to suffer, to receive an impression from without, to experience something [as opposed to doing it], to be affected in some way, to come to be in some state.”<sup>40</sup> The invisible *pathos* carries the visible into existence. An atmosphere or experience provides the grounding and the medium for thinking about human nature, for the very activity of philosophy. To what extent can one observe philosophizing without being drawn in, without participating? Similarly, to what extent can Glaucon imaginatively construct an experience without being in some way influenced by that experience? This is, I believe, Socrates’ point: the ensuing discussion (that is, philosophizing) proceeds through this image of an experience with the result that the imaged experience will in turn affect the image-maker.

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<sup>40</sup> *LSJ Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v.

To see a *pathos* is to experience that *pathos*. “Seeing a πάθος suggests a shift from vision as the act of seeing to vision as being seen—being affected, acted upon.”<sup>41</sup> This double nature of *pathos* makes philological sense given that the verb *paskhō* contains a built-in passive meaning: to experience something (active voice) is necessarily to be affected by it (passive voice). Socrates’ request to Glaucon disrupts the idea that poetry is completely detached from experience or from truth. Seeing *pathos* means being in a certain mood (experiencing), or letting a mood come over us. Glaucon is tasked with making an image that will in turn affect him. The ensuing discussion of human nature in particular aims at affecting Glaucon, since this conversation *is* philosophy itself in practice. The conversation between Socrates and Glaucon is not idle but aims at shaping souls. Tying this together, then, we see that man makes an image by which he is then shaped. Imagination as a faculty of seeing, of making and perceiving images, is thus also a formative faculty.

An important affinity between Murdoch’s point about image-making and gestalt thinking is that in both cases, there is a sense that understanding itself is fundamentally spatial in nature, as she suggests in the following:

...sight (vision) is our greatest blessing, without which we would not reach philosophy. Our ability to use visual structures to understand non-visual structures (as well as other different visual ones) is fundamental to explanation in any field.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Baracchi 2002, 19. I am indebted to Baracchi’s work on this passage, although she and I take the discussion in two quite different directions.

<sup>42</sup> Murdoch 1997, 445.

She attributes this insight to Plato. Literal vision is not the point here so much as the idea that “seeing as” characterizes most human understanding.<sup>43</sup> Murdoch shares this underlying notion with some other philosophers, most notably with Wittgenstein. Consider the following:<sup>44</sup>

564. Now when the aspect dawns, can I separate a visual experience from a thought-experience?—If you separate them the dawning of the aspect seems to vanish.

565. I think it could also be put this way: *Astonishment* is essential to a change of aspect. And astonishment is thinking.

For Wittgenstein, the experience of understanding or insight cannot be understood unless in spatial terms. Astonishment arises from a change of aspect or perspective. And if astonishment *is* thinking, as he claims, then thinking arises from a change of perspective. This aligns with gestalt theory’s claim that understanding is about seeing the shape of things, and that a failure to understand is thus a failure to perceive. Astonishment also echoes the importance of imagination in the perception of metaphors (gestalts). If a metaphor is not striking enough, if it does not astonish or surprise us, then it lacks the requisite power to shift our perspective.

Murdoch acknowledges the spatial dimension of understanding when she remarks that “one seeks clarification by moving concepts around.”<sup>45</sup> On this view, philosophy is a practice that deals in images and their reorganization. Trying to see concepts from a different vantage point, trying to move ideas from one context to another—such is the

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<sup>43</sup> Indeed, I do not think that spatial understanding must be *visual*. For example, the gestalt perception of a melody is aural but still spatial: “Music occurs in aural space. Aural space is space as it is perceived by beings that can hear. It is the auditory analogue of visual space” (Zwicky 2019, 111).

<sup>44</sup> Both from Wittgenstein 1982.

<sup>45</sup> Murdoch 1992, 322.

basis of understanding and truth-seeking. When Wittgenstein claims that “all that philosophy can do is destroy idols,” he does not mean that philosophy is only good for deconstructive criticism but instead that philosophical problems arise from looking at the world in a certain way.<sup>46</sup> If we want to overcome these problems, we just have to change the way we see.<sup>47</sup> A dress is purple in the dim lights of the jazz club and red under the morning sun. Problems of reconciling logical contradiction in the *Phaedrus* are no longer problems when we realize that Plato writes with a torqued unity and without commitments to systematic non-contradiction. Murdoch remarks on this very example:

The most obvious paradox in [Plato’s criticisms of art] is that Plato is a great artist. It is not perhaps to be imagined that this paradox troubled him too much. Scholars in the land of posterity assemble the work and invent the problems. Plato had other troubles...<sup>48</sup>

What seems to be a paradox or an unbearable contradiction goes away when we take up a new vantage point. Once we stop reading Plato from the perspective of modern professional philosophy and systematic analytical thought, we find we have much less to worry about.

Imagination and spatial understanding go together: imagination in Murdoch’s sense is about perceiving, bringing things to light, which I for one can only conceive of in spatial terms.<sup>49</sup> Here she writes about moral philosophizing in spatial terms:

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<sup>46</sup> Wittgenstein 1993, 171.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Rorty 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Murdoch 1997, 462.

<sup>49</sup> This is where I am in deepest agreement with conceptual metaphor theory of the sort done by Lakoff and Johnson. Having a body just means thinking in metaphors: “The mind is inherently embodied. Thought is mostly unconscious. Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 3).

Space and light are essential images in the description of morality. What is needful is inner space, in which other things can lodge and move and be considered; we withdraw ourselves and let other things be.<sup>50</sup>

That the language of gestalt theory is spatial is no mere coincidence (*gestalt shift*, *gestalt perception*, *gestalt insight*). Murdoch speaks of concepts lodging in the mind, occupying space and thereby attention. She also writes:

Imagination suggests the searching, joining, light-seeking, semi-figurative nature of the mind's work, which prepares and forms consciousness for action.<sup>51</sup>

Imagination is an actively searching faculty. We crave (have an erotic desire) perception of the "lineaments of reality" as Zwicky phrases it. Gestalt perceptions satisfy us on a deep level, and the imagination is what helps us see the shape of those satisfying forms.

Understanding as a spatial phenomenon reinforces Plato's point in the *Seventh Letter* that true philosophical knowledge cannot be captured in words. Simone Weil echoes Plato's description of a fire that suddenly kindles in the soul and then sustains itself there:

Method for understanding images, symbols, etc. Not to try to interpret them, but to look at them till the light suddenly dawns. Generally speaking, a method for the exercise of the intelligence, which consists of looking. Application of this rule for the discrimination between the real and the illusory.<sup>52</sup>

Weil distinguishes between interpreting and seeing: an image cannot be grasped by following an interpretation. Seeing is the basis of interpretation, not the product of it. Weil's description of a light suddenly dawning is undoubtedly informed by her deep familiarity with Plato, but it also sounds quite like gestalt insights. The dawn image shows up in Wittgenstein too:

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<sup>50</sup> Murdoch 1992, 347.

<sup>51</sup> Murdoch 1992, 323.

<sup>52</sup> Weil 1952, 120.



141. When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)<sup>53</sup>

Dawn in both writers is fundamentally spatial. We use dawn to tell time, but the physical phenomenon itself is just movement through space. Weil and Wittgenstein underscore the idea of understanding as illumination. We may not see the truth, but then the light streams in and we do, we see what was always there. Meaning is real and external, and perception is a matter of attention, often a matter of spatial recognition or reorganization. Light shows up again in Murdoch in the following passage:

The ideal of knowledge is to see face to face, not (*eikasia*) in a glass darkly...The best we can hope for is the flash of ultra-verbal understanding which may occur in live philosophical discussion when careful informed trained speech has set the scene.<sup>54</sup>

Murdoch is with Plato and gestalt theory in thinking that experiences of meaning often defy language (“a flash of ultra-verbal understanding”). Language can “set the scene” for insight, and as linguistic creatures we cannot avoid this, but knowing is still seeing at the end of the day.

I want to point again to Murdoch’s remark about theorization, that it (theorization/metaphysics) helps us to build “a huge hall of reflection full of light and space and fresh air, in which ideas and intuitions can be unsystematically nurtured.”<sup>55</sup> Notice all the threads coming together here: understanding is spatial (“a huge hall”) and requires light (clarity), it resists logical-analytic language (“unsystematically nurtured”), and proceeds by unverifiable gestalts (“intuitions”) that take place in purposefully

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<sup>53</sup> Wittgenstein 1977.

<sup>54</sup> Murdoch 1997, 413.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

constructed metaphors. Or, to sum this all up with Wittgenstein: “To repeat: don’t think, but look!”<sup>56</sup>

#### **§4, Attention and Cognitive Clutter**

Before getting more fully back to Plato, I will say just a bit more about the idea that metaphor turns our attention to something outside ourselves. Attention is a major concept in Murdoch, one she inherits and tweaks from Plato (sometimes by way of Weil).<sup>57</sup> Murdoch’s notion of attention clarifies my own understanding of Plato’s Forms. The Forms are metaphors designed to direct our attention to meaningful experiences in the world—so let’s talk about attention for a moment. The basic point I want to make is that meaningful things in the world are often hard to see because of cognitive clutter, which comes in two forms: *doxa* and the self or ego. This gestures back to Chapter Three and the importance of *elenkhos* as a clearing away. Attention fits into this too, because once we clear our cognitive clutter, we can pay attention to more meaningful, truer things.

Murdoch spent her philosophical career criticizing the dominant moral theories of her (and our) day and proposing an alternative based on Plato.

It seems to me that there is a void in present-day moral philosophy. Areas peripheral to philosophy expand (psychology, political and social theory) or collapse (religion) without philosophy being able in the one case to encounter, and in the other case to rescue, the values involved. A working philosophical psychology is needed with can at least attempt to connect modern psychological terminology with a terminology concerned with virtue... We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Wittgenstein 1953, §66.

<sup>57</sup> For two good, short papers on the influence of Weil on Murdoch, particularly concerning the topic of attention, see Bok 2005 and Bowden 1998.

<sup>58</sup> Murdoch 1997, 337.

Philosophy for Murdoch has failed to adequately account for actual human experience and has thus been replaced in this realm by science and social science. Murdoch sums up the problem thus:

Briefly put, our picture of ourselves has become too grand, we have isolated, and identified ourselves with, an unrealistic conception of will, we have lost the vision of a reality separate from ourselves, and we have no adequate conception of original sin...The moral agent then is pictured as an isolated principle of will, or burrowing pinpoint of consciousness...<sup>59</sup>

Moral theories like deontology and consequentialism and existentialism all in different ways assume an isolated, autonomous self that wills moral actions, that uses reason to identify right and wrong. Murdoch quarrels with this:

What we *really* are seems much more like an obscure system of energy out of which choices and visible acts of will emerge at intervals in ways which are often unclear and often dependent on the condition of the system in between the moments of choice.<sup>60</sup>

Murdoch invokes Freud and his insight that we are not always fully in control or even aware of our own desires and thoughts. Poetic philosophy proceeds from a similar premise of human imperfection. Simply put, if we do not have clarity on even our own selves, how can we suppose that we are freely choosing moral agents?

If this is so, one of the main problems of moral philosophy might be formulated thus: are there any techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish, in such a way that when moments of choice arrive we shall be sure of acting rightly?<sup>61</sup>

Philosophy has been so focused on asking “*What is right or wrong?*” that it has failed to ask “*What is Good?*” and “*What would a good person be like?*” Murdoch urges more focus on these

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<sup>59</sup> Murdoch 1997, 338.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 344. Murdoch references Freud throughout this particular essay but offers no exact citations.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

latter sorts of questions. Notice that this is basically a descriptive question: imagining Goodness, seeing Goodness, requires us to say what Goodness is *like*, requires us to think metaphorically.

The problem, more or less, is that imaging or seeing the Good is difficult because our own ego gets in the way: it is difficult to see reality through the lens of our own selves. To attend to reality is to attend to something outside of myself, to something real that forces me to acknowledge that I am not the center of the universe, an admission which will have ethical consequences. Thus, perceiving or seeing becomes ethically charged. Influenced by Plato, Murdoch gives the example of love:

Consider being in love. Consider too the attempt to check being in love, and the need in such a case of another object to attend to. Where strong emotions of sexual love, or of hatred, resentment, or jealousy are concerned, 'pure will' can usually achieve little. It is small use telling oneself 'Stop being in love, stop feeling resentment, be just.' What is needed is a reorientation which will provide an energy of a different kind, from a different source.<sup>62</sup>

In the example of love, there is someone who matters enough to us that we want to know them, understand them. Another example she gives is prayer: the child asks God for favors, and prayer is still egoistic. For the thoughtful adult, prayer is more a way of contemplating God, feeling small, trying to get some perspective. The most famous example of attention as an ethical practice is learning a foreign language (Russian in her example), in which we are "confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect."<sup>63</sup> It is difficult and slow-going to learn another language, maybe we'll never fully master it. Still, the study is "a progressive revelation of something which exists

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 373.

independently of me.”<sup>64</sup> A language comes with whole systems and histories and rules that do not care about my selfish desires at all. Either I submit to practice and study and then learn or I do not. My own ego must submit to the laws of the foreign language. In this way, “[l]ove of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal.”<sup>65</sup> Learning a language requires humility and honesty (we cannot fake a good accent or fake the ability to read), and so we can see how certain virtues like these can be exercised by attention (in this case attention to a language).

Attending to something is hard work. “Our attachments tend to be selfish and strong, and the transformation of our love from selfishness to unselfishness is sometimes hard even to conceive of.”<sup>66</sup> Moreover, as in the case of a foreign language, cultivating attention does not always happen in a dramatic way. “What happens every day is important, images can affect the quality of our thoughts and wishes” and our ability to perceive truth in the world “rests upon deep areas of sensibility and creative imagination, upon removal from one state of mind to another, upon shift of attachments, upon love and respect for the contingent details of the world.”<sup>67</sup> Here we go back to images and metaphor. Sometimes, what seems a mere metaphor strikes us so powerfully that we shift our attention, that we recognize some truth we had been oblivious to before.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 375.

<sup>67</sup> Murdoch 1992, 337.

Because the ego is so naturally egoistic, love matters a great deal in our ability to attend to something outside ourselves. The *Phaedrus* shows us how philosophy is motivated by love (specifically *erōs*). If (poetic) philosophy is primarily about shifting attention and trying to re-cognize meaning in the world, and if love is the driving force in that shifting of attention, then love compels us to see reality. Murdoch writes:

‘Eros’ is the continuous operation of spiritual *energy*, desire, intellect, love, as it moves among and responds to particular objects of attention, the force of magnetism and attraction which joins us to the world, making it a better or worse world...<sup>68</sup>

*Erōs* as a sort of energy drives the intellect to respond to the world attentively. Murdoch here echoes the *Phaedrus* wherein Socrates responds attentively both to the setting around him (*theion topon*) and to his interlocutor Phaedrus (this attentive responsiveness was alluded to with lyric figures as opposed to fixed epic).<sup>69</sup> Gestalt theory reinforces a point that Plato seems to have been keenly aware of: we *desire* meaning—and what is meaning? Meaning is the recognition of coherent, clear forms that exist outside of us, in the external world. What we desire, therefore, is to clearly see meaningful forms. And how can we see those forms? By shifting our attention, by experiencing a gestalt *shift* (this is why understanding is fundamentally spatial).

### **§5, Seeing the Forms**

Humans have a natural urge to see how things hang together, an *erōs* for clarity, a directedness in gestalt terms, a one-making and truth-seeking consciousness in Murdoch’s words.<sup>70</sup> We find a similar idea in the *Phaedrus*:

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 496.

<sup>69</sup> *Phr.* 279b.

<sup>70</sup> “It is characteristic of human reason to seek unity in multiplicity” (Murdoch 1997, 388).

δεῖ γὰρ ἄνθρωπον συνιέναι κατ' εἶδος λεγόμενον, ἐκ πολλῶν ἰὸν αἰσθήσεων εἰς ἓν λογισμῷ συναιρούμενον<sup>71</sup>

A human being must grasp an intelligible idea formed by collecting many sense perceptions into a unity through reason.

Here the urge to grasp things appears beside sense perception, going against the common notion that Plato disparages all sense perception. That view rests on a dualism which I have already rejected: as Murdoch says, “there is no Platonic elsewhere.” Elsewhere, Murdoch describes Platonism as a pilgrimage:

Plato pictures human life as a pilgrimage from appearance to reality. The intelligence, seeking satisfaction, moves from uncritical acceptance of sense experience and of conduct, to a more sophisticated and morally enlightened understanding.<sup>72</sup>

The key here is that the pilgrimage from appearance to reality need not be understood in metaphysical terms but rather as a pilgrimage from the illusions of cognitive clutter (the ego and *doxa*) to the world the way it is without our own self in the way.<sup>73</sup> Weil sums it up when she says, “[i]f only I could see a landscape as it is when I am not there.”<sup>74</sup> Why would anyone want this? Because seeing a landscape without myself in the way means seeing the landscape as it *really is*, not as it *seems to me*. This is mind-bending to think about, which is why Plato resorts to metaphor. Murdoch’s theory of attention shows us that reality is *here*. The Forms are real, and they are not “elsewhere.”

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<sup>71</sup> *Phr.* 249b–c.

<sup>72</sup> Murdoch 1997, 387.

<sup>73</sup> This is what happens in the story of Nanguo Ziqi in the *Qi wu lun* 齊物論 chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, as I will argue in Chapter Six.

<sup>74</sup> Weil 1952, 89.

So if perception of the Forms as I have defined them is non-analytic and non-verifiable, how do we know when we're getting close to them? Murdoch drops hints: "intensity and bulk are not connected with truth...Purity, simplicity, truthfulness, and the absence of pretense or pretension are the marks of sound art..."<sup>75</sup> Plato writes something similar in the *Philebus*, where Socrates describes truth as clean (*katharon*) and unmixed, uncluttered, and clear (*eikrines*).<sup>76</sup> Murdoch and Plato both seem to view truth as something clear. We try to see it but things get in the way: the ego and our sedimented beliefs, habits, opinions (*doxa*).<sup>77</sup> Perceiving meaning is about reducing this clutter. We don't necessarily have to throw away everything in a room to eliminate clutter. Sometimes we can rearrange things—that is, we can make a room more integrated, placing the parts in a harmonious relation to the whole. It's a difference of complexity versus complicatedness. Complexity is intricate but still integrated, not chaotic, whereas complicatedness is chaotic and disunified, lacks meaning. We have all heard of relationship problems where one partner says "*it's complicated*," which we rightly take to mean "*there is unnecessary conflict and drama that doesn't really make much sense but happens anyway*." Complexity may have many parts, but everything fits just so in a meaningful whole. Think about Bach's characteristic use of counterpoint in which different instruments or voices play distinct melodic lines simultaneously while converging on certain harmonies. Complex to be sure, but cluttered? Hardly. In fact, to remove one of the voices in a

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<sup>75</sup> Murdoch 1997, 400.

<sup>76</sup> *Philebus* 52d.

<sup>77</sup> Plato's *Apology* is especially salient here. See also Benson 2000, Clay 2000, Nehamas 1999, and Sallis 1975, Part One.



misguided clean-up effort would throw off the brilliance of the four-part harmonies when the voices *do* converge. The complexity of Bach's counterpoint is what allows his cantatas to resonate, to mean and affect us. To put melodic lines where they do not belong (to make clutter) would ruin the resonance of the whole the way clutter in a room ruins the look of the place or the way too much make-up ruins the resonant beauty of a face. Forms resonate because they are integrated, when one part sounds or shines, other parts sound and shine. Clutter is anything that dampens or clouds this resonance. Recall that the etymological root of "clarity" means "to resound, shout, call." Clutter and complicatedness block clarity.

Socrates, I suggested, is someone who cannot abide cognitive clutter the way some of us cannot abide physical clutter in a room. Socrates' allergy to cognitive clutter is synonymous with his love of truth. Murdoch sees the task of philosophy as "emphasizing and attending to harmonious patterns which are already latent in the universe...truth is expressive of reality (the two ideas blend in the word ἀλήθεια [*alētheia*])..."<sup>78</sup> She elsewhere describes *alētheia* ("truth") as "truthfulness and realism."<sup>79</sup> There is a link between what is real and what is true that the Ancient Greek *alētheia* captures but our standard use of "truth" does not.<sup>80</sup> *Alētheia* is that which is not (*a-*) forgotten or concealed

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<sup>78</sup> Murdoch 1997, 396.

<sup>79</sup> Murdoch 1997, 422.

<sup>80</sup> Although, as I mentioned in Chapter Three, "to true" is a seldom-used English verb meaning "to align with something." This does suggest a connection between what is true and what is real because there must *be* something *there* with which we align. For the canonical piece of scholarship on *alētheia*, see Detienne 1999.

(*lēthē*), or, that which we are able to perceive. Truth is what we perceive. And what do we perceive? Resonant forms.<sup>81</sup>

One way of understanding the problem Plato inherits from Heraclitus is: “how do we seem to know so much upon the basis of so little?”<sup>82</sup> We have unaccountable insights, hunches, intuitions, feelings and emotions, and we cannot analyze any of them. More, we have real knowledge that is subjective and unverifiable: I can *know* I love someone even if I cannot verify it objectively.<sup>83</sup> Plato’s *Meno* is maybe the most explicit treatment of this problem: Socrates tries to figure out how it is that we have some intuitive ideas about virtue even when we’ve not been taught, even if virtue is not at all teachable.<sup>84</sup> In the dialogues, Socrates often posits a theory of recollection as a solution to this problem: we have these intuitive ideas because we *remember* the Forms from before our time as embodied human beings. But this explanation requires a whole literal metaphysical system of eternal Forms and reincarnation and immortal souls—just the sort of myth from Socrates’ palinode in the *Phaedrus*. If we understand this myth as a metaphor, if we understand Socrates’ talk of recollection as a groping metaphorical attempt to explain how we know more than we can say, then we sidestep a lot of bother.

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<sup>81</sup> Again, at the risk of being misunderstood, let me emphasize that I am *not* saying that anything anyone perceives is true. Sometimes our gestalt perceptions get it wrong, and something a form is an assemblage of parts rather than a meaningful whole (e.g., a pile of lumber versus a log cabin).

<sup>82</sup> Murdoch 1997, 401. Irwin 1995a explores this inheritance in great detail.

<sup>83</sup> Nussbaum 1990 is a series of beautiful meditations on this point.

<sup>84</sup> See Sallis 1975 for a thoughtful overview of the *Meno*.

A modern gestalt theorist can try to answer the “Heraclitus problem” with a wealth of recent experimental evidence, but Plato had no such resources. Murdoch explains it this way:

From the start the need for the Forms in Plato’s mind is a moral need. The theory expresses a certainty that goodness is something indubitably real, unitary, and (somehow) simple, not fully expressed in the sensible world, therefore living elsewhere...but of course it is never very easy to see what the Forms are supposed to be, since, in speaking of them Plato moves continually between ontology, logic, and religious myth.<sup>85</sup>

Plato doesn’t come up with the Forms to posit something just for the sake of positing it. He is not a modern philosopher trying to scrape together fodder for a provocative journal article. He feels compelled, he has a “need” (think of the incorrigible compulsions of gestalt insight). There’s a gut feeling that meaning really does exist outside of ourselves even if it’s not fully perceptible or answerable to empirical analysis. This makes it feel like meaning “lives elsewhere,” but that is not a literal locutionary description. This is also why mention of the Forms across the dialogues is so fragmentary and even contradictory, why Plato sometimes engages in myths and other times in rigorous logical argument: the point is to gropingly try and describe something, *not* to build a logical system. Murdoch is right that “[t]he original role of the Forms was not to lead us to some attenuated elsewhere but to show us the real world. It is the dreamer in the cave who is astray and elsewhere.”<sup>86</sup> Perceiving meaning and truth, grasping a gestalt, can sometimes *feel* like transcending to another world, but this is because (1) the experience can be so deeply affecting and (2) our own cognitive clutter is so formidable: "obsession, prejudice, envy,

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<sup>85</sup> Murdoch 1997, 408.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 426–427.

anxiety, ignorance, greed, neurosis, and so on and so on *veil* reality.”<sup>87</sup> Our human nature means that we will always be pulled away from meaningful vision of reality. Nobody is perfect, and when we do get close, it doesn’t last long. The Forms are aspirational images, metaphors of perfection that we try to grasp but never do.

“So the Forms are just a way of saying that we should pay attention to what’s there? That seems quite uninspiring and deflating.” Yes, after a fashion. The Forms are a way of showing us that there is meaning in the world that is resistant to analytic thought. This need not be uninspiring though. The experience of meaning is one of the profoundest parts of human life, and it comes in more varieties than we can count. There are serious forces arrayed against it: analytic thought generally, our language-use, the innate urge to manipulate the world in piecemeal, selfish interactions with the world wherein we *use* it for our own gain, the temptations of digital life and algorithmic reasoning that dominate our society, and so on. To say that the Forms are “just” a metaphor for meaning is to downplay things quite a bit. This would be like saying that the *Iliad* is just a metaphor for war and human life, or that the *Goldberg Variations* is just someone tinkering around on the piano.

### **§6, *Parmenides***

A testament to Plato’s genius is that he seems to have intuited many possible criticisms to his work and then written texts that are alive enough to respond to those criticisms. In this section I will give a brief reading of the *Parmenides* as Plato’s depiction of what happens when we try to submit perception of the Forms to a ruthless logic.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 426.

Although the exact way the Forms are talked about across the dialogues may change, I think there are some underlying commonalities. Murdoch points out that

[s]ome of the difficulties of philosophical explanation may be seen in the act that although Plato at first treats the Forms as quasi-things (what a word means, perfect particulars, ‘soul-stuff’) and later as attributes, he yet preserves them as objects of divine vision (though we are not told what they ‘look like’) in the *Timaeus*, because there is something essential that can only be explained by this image.<sup>88</sup>

One common view is that the Forms in the so-called early dialogues tend to be more like immanent universals, and in the so-called later dialogues more like transcendent models.<sup>89</sup> This idea relies on a chronology that divides the Platonic dialogues into early, middle, and late periods. If we find contradictions in Plato's writing, the theory goes, we can explain them away by showing how his thinking evolved over time. Unfortunately, there is no solid support for dating the dialogues, regardless of how tempting it may be.<sup>90</sup> What Murdoch points out in the above quotation is that with or without an established chronology, the

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<sup>88</sup> Murdoch 1997, 445.

<sup>89</sup> Trabattoni 2016, Silverman 2002, Fine 1999, Dorter 1994, Bowen 1989, Taylor 1956, Cherniss 1944, and Wilamowitz 1919 are all representative and cover an equally representative timespan.

<sup>90</sup> Chronological orderings of the dialogues come in three varieties: dramatic, content, and stylistic. Dramatic orderings try to order the dialogues based on their dramatic content, which is hopeless since Plato basically wrote historical fiction. Content orderings group the dialogues based on their intellectual content and are the commonest. Nussbaum 1986's argument that the *Phaedrus* is Plato's recantation of his earlier views is a prime example. Grouping the dialogues into trilogies or tetralogies based on content goes back to antiquity, but the most influential groupings in the contemporary era come from Sayre 1995, Vlastos 1991, Guthrie 1976, Friedländer 1969, and Owen 1953. Stylistic orderings date the dialogues based on analysis of morphology and syntax. Ledger 1989 is the best-regarded study on this. Stylistic analysis fails, however, on several counts. Stylistics ignores Plato's artistry. While stylistic differences are detectable across the dialogues, such differences do not justify any timeline: perhaps Plato wrote differently through different characters or related to certain themes? Capra and Martinelli 2011 also points out that Plato is known to have revised his dialogues throughout his life, further throwing doubt onto stylistic datings. For discussions of dating the dialogues see Zuckert 2009 and Nails 1995. Blondell 2002 rejects stylistic analysis but does group so-called later dialogues together on stylistic grounds. Howland 1991 strongly rejects most attempts at chronology, as does Dorter 1994. Overall, I am in agreement with Taylor 2002: the impulse to group and order the dialogues is symptomatic of a general impulse borne out of textual criticism and philology in Germany during the nineteenth century—it says more about us than Plato.

Forms always show up in the dialogues as objects of vision or contemplation. This reinforces my point that they are metaphors for clear vision of reality.

The *Parmenides* plays a key role in scholarship on the Forms because in it, an elderly Parmenides eviscerates a young Socrates, who gives a confused and inadequate defense of the Forms. Orthodox Plato scholarship groups the *Parmenides* as one of the last dialogues Plato wrote, and so the refutation of the Forms therein is taken to be Plato's own refutation of his earlier, naïve metaphysics.<sup>91</sup> But this only holds if metaphysics is a literal system that cannot contain contradictions. Murdoch suggests that metaphysics “must be judged as a big complicated heuristic image.”<sup>92</sup> A heuristic is a stratagem or rough rule of thumb used to investigate or discover something (from the Ancient Greek *heuriskō*, “to find or discover”). Heuristics are *ad hoc*, often improvised ways to try and grasp a solution, but crucially, a heuristic need not be true. What matters for a heuristic is whether it gets the job done.

What is the role of heuristic images in thought? Murdoch makes the following helpful remark from an address in 1951 to the Aristotelian Society where she, at only 32-years-old, debated giants like Gilbert Ryle:

Think of conceptualising...as the activity of grasping, or reducing to order, our situations with the help of a language which is fundamentally metaphorical...Seen from this point of view, thinking is not the using of symbols which designate absent objects, symbolising and sensing being strictly divided from each other. Thinking is not designating at all, but rather understanding, grasping, ‘possessing’.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Owen 1953, for example, argues that the *Parmenides* must be late because it contains passages that Plato simply could not have written *before* the *Timaeus*, which obviously comes quite late. The circularity of such an argument is apparent.

<sup>92</sup> Murdoch 1992, 196.

<sup>93</sup> Murdoch 1997, 40–41.

Note again the idea that understanding is spatial and metaphorical: we move around concepts until they click and light up and make sense. Anything that can help us perceive this clarity is a heuristic. The critic who draws our attention to the soundscape of a poem is using a heuristic. The jokes or the sudden striking blows of a Zen master to a pupil are both heuristics. So, let us take metaphysics as a kind of heuristic image, a metaphor that is designed to illuminate something. This sounds simple enough but I can't stress how antithetical it is to orthodox Platonism, to how philosophers of almost any stripe see Plato's Forms.<sup>94</sup>

Socrates in the *Parmenides* has all the enthusiasm and subtlety of a clever undergraduate out of his depth. He is almost laughably unclear on many points, hopping inelegantly from one position to the next, taking argumentative swings like a drunk in a bar fight. Maybe the most basic question of the text is “*what sorts of things require Forms?*” We all have different notions of beauty, and so it's understandable that someone might posit a universal or transcendent paradigm of beauty. But beauty and justice and truth are all noble and dignified. In the *Republic*, we saw Socrates discussing the Form of Couch, which is silly enough. The *Parmenides* takes this idea to its logical conclusion when Parmenides asks Socrates if things that are “ridiculous like hair, mud, dirt or anything else rather worthless and common” also have Forms.<sup>95</sup> Or, is it only the “big things” like

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<sup>94</sup> Drew Hyland gets it exactly right when he says the following: “To a striking extent today, to both “analytic” interpreters of Plato *and* to “continental” interpreters, ‘Platonism’ simply *means* the theory of Forms...” (Hyland 2002, 257).

<sup>95</sup> *Parm.* 130c: ἦ καὶ περὶ τῶνδε, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἃ καὶ γελοῖα δόξειεν ἄν εἶναι, οἷον θριζὶς καὶ πηλὸς καὶ ῥύπος ἢ ἄλλο τι ἀτιμώτατόν τε καὶ φαυλότατον...

“ideas of the Just, the Beautiful, the Good” that have Forms?<sup>96</sup> Murdoch comments on this very spot in the *Parmenides*:

What about mud, hair, and dirt (*Parmenides*, 130C), and in what sense if any are they to be ‘given up’? The metaphor of knowledge as vision is not so easily eliminated...When the veil is removed and the rational and virtuous man sees reality, how much—indeed what—does he see? Are there things which somehow exist but which are irrelevant to serious thought, as Socrates was inclined to say in the *Parmenides*? ...What does the light of the sun reveal; and who sees the most minute particulars and cherishes them and points them out? As one batters here at the cage of language it is difficult to keep the artist out of the picture even when one is attempting to describe the good man.<sup>97</sup>

It’s a typical Murdoch passage with a flurry of questions and big ideas. To stick with the idea that understanding is spatial and involves *seeing* reality: what exactly are we looking at when we pull back the veil? Parmenides presses Socrates to admit that if these Forms are really the basis of all being, then we should expect to see Forms for “piss and shit” (to quote the *Zhuangzi*) right alongside Forms of Beauty and Justice.<sup>98</sup> “*So are you defending Parmenides’ absurd conclusion? Is everything from pocket lint to piss and shit equally meaningful? Or are there some things that exist which are irrelevant to serious human thought?*” Yes. Not every form in the world is integrated and resonant. Sometimes a whole is just an assemblage, like a pile of fallen rocks. But just because there are non-meaningful piles of lumber does not mean there are not also meaningful wooden houses. If the Forms are literal *sources* of being, then yes, we need Forms for “piss and shit.” But if the Forms are metaphors meant to

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<sup>96</sup> *Parm.* 130b: ἢ καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα, εἰπεῖν τὸν Παρμενίδην, οἷον δικαίου τι εἶδος αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ καὶ πάντων αὐτῶν τοιούτων;

<sup>97</sup> Murdoch 1997, 427.

<sup>98</sup> *Zhuangzi*, chapter 22 (*Zhi bei you* 知北遊), 812: 屎溺. The context is a discussion of where the *dao* 道 is to be found, and *Zhuangzi* confirms that it is even in piss and shit (to borrow Watson’s translation).



illuminate meaning in the world, and if not all forms are meaningful, then we don't need to worry about Parmenides' criticism here—we can just tell him “*no.*”

Let Parmenides represent a modern professional philosopher attacking the Theory of the Forms. He wants to know how the Forms interact with the illusory, impermanent, physical world around us. Are all of our individual notions of justice different instantiations of the Form of Justice?<sup>99</sup> As if the Form of Justice manifests in our mortal opinions the way that Christ is a mortal manifestation of a transcendent God? Or do our notions of justice somehow take part in a universal Form, with the Form divided up among all the various participants here in the world?<sup>100</sup> Or maybe the Form of Justice itself is in all our different notions of justice all at the same time, the way the same day can be multiple places at once while still being the same single day?<sup>101</sup> Young Socrates gropes at this last suggestion like a life-saver tossed to a drowning man but abandons it almost immediately when Parmenides presses him. Maybe, Parmenides continues, the Forms explain resemblances? If  $X$  seems like  $Y$ , doesn't this posit some third point,  $Z$ , that  $X$  and  $Y$  share which would be the Form giving universal reference for  $X$  and  $Y$ ?<sup>102</sup> This too seems appealing to our boy Socrates until he realizes that the old Eleatic philosopher has trapped him: if the Forms explain resemblances, then there must be a Form for every resemblance and a Form for the Form of every resemblance and so on. The infinite regress scares Socrates away from this option. Parmenides then wonders if a Form is a

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<sup>99</sup> *Parm.* 130c.

<sup>100</sup> *Parm.* 131b.

<sup>101</sup> *Parm.* 131b–c.

<sup>102</sup> *Parm.* 132b. The infamous “Third Man” argument.

thought, which would save us from having to deal with the issue of resemblances. But this would mean that everything is just made up of thoughts, which both say is absurd.<sup>103</sup> What about natural patterns? Maybe the Forms are paradigms on which the world is based?<sup>104</sup> Socrates ditches this possibility after another flurry of attacks before Parmenides finally concludes that the Forms "cannot be known" (*agnosta*).<sup>105</sup>

Plato has crafted an intricate dramatic scene. The older, experienced, and famous Parmenides has cornered the young, eager Socrates into making the sort of either/or distinctions analytic thought is so fond of. What Plato's drama shows us is what happens when one person bullies another person into logical dichotomies, into systematic analysis. Earlier I quoted Murdoch's insistence that thought proceeds metaphorically and her warning against taking metaphors and subjecting them to logical analysis. That is precisely what Plato shows us in this text. "*What are the Forms?*" asks Parmenides. Murdoch echoes the question:

But what is the 'reality' to which Eros moves us and from which art allegedly diverts us? The Theory of Forms was invented to explain this, and the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist* exhibited some of the resultant difficulties...<sup>106</sup>

The Forms are metaphors that explain that there is something meaningful and true outside of us. The *Parmenides* shows us how badly things go when we try to fit this observation into analytic thought. It seems to me an observation in dramatic form

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<sup>103</sup> *Parm.* 132c.

<sup>104</sup> *Parm.* 132d: τὰ μὲν εἶδη ταῦτα ὡσπερ παραδείγματα ἐστάναι ἐν τῇ φύσει.

<sup>105</sup> *Parm.* 133c.

<sup>106</sup> Murdoch 1997, 426.

ineffable gestalt insights. Whichever model of the Forms one adopts, whichever of Parmenides' mocking suggestions we accept, this insight holds.

Murdoch points to another appearance of the Forms from another so-called late dialogue:

The last reference to the Forms is the sober one at *Laws*, 965: 'Can there be any more accurate vision or view of any objects than through the ability to look from the dissimilar many to the single idea?'<sup>107</sup>

The most accurate sort of vision is the ability to see the coherences among seemingly incoherent objects. The Athenian Stranger (not Socrates for once!) suggests this perception of coherence as the highest kind of knowing and then compares it to master craftsmen:

οὐκοῦν ἐλέγομεν τόν γε πρὸς ἕκαστα ἄκρον δημιουργόν τε καὶ φύλακα μὴ μόνον δεῖν πρὸς τὰ πολλὰ βλέπειν δυνατὸν εἶναι, πρὸς δὲ τὸ ἓν ἐπιείεσθαι γνῶναί τε, καὶ γόντα πρὸς ἐκεῖνο συντάξασθαι πάντα συνορώντα;<sup>108</sup>

Didn't we say that a master craftsman of any sort must not only be able to attend to the many but *also* must be able to press toward the One and perceive it, and perceiving it, be able to discern and organize everything into coherence?

The master craftsman is one who can attend to complexity and plurality while also seeing coherence and wholeness. This looks to me like gestalt intelligence, and the Athenian Stranger upholds the example as the highest form of vision and knowing. Murdoch adds, in reference to this passage, that "...it is in general impossible to establish how Forms can be known."<sup>109</sup> True, but it is also impossible to establish how to be a good hockey player

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<sup>107</sup> Murdoch 1997, 408–409.

<sup>108</sup> *Laws* 965c.

<sup>109</sup> Murdoch 1997, 409.

or poet, how to be a good human being.<sup>110</sup> We cannot put these things into formulae, but it doesn't mean they aren't there and aren't important. We can look at a hockey player after the game and feel confident about calling him a good or bad player, he can't write a pamphlet giving the rest of us an algorithm for how to do it. Parmenides' attack of the Forms illustrates this. The *Parmenides* is not Plato subjecting his own doctrines to refutation. There are no doctrines. The *Parmenides* shows that the Forms are to be taken seriously, but not subjected to systematic analysis.

### **§7, Participating and Resonating**

*“Parmenides asks a good question though! How do individuals interact with the Forms? What happens when we perceive the Forms? Let's say we see the Form of Justice—even metaphorically. What then?”* The short answer is that when we perceive resonant forms, we respond in kind: we co-respond, the way one bell sets another ringing. What does that look like? There's no way to know precisely. Here is Murdoch's answer:

To put it (as Plato does not) in terms with a Kantian ring: a good man does not copy another good man, playing him as an actor plays a role, but attempts to become himself a part of function of the divine intelligence. We were never told to 'copy' the Forms by producing something else, but only to become able to see them and thus in a sense to become like them.<sup>111</sup>

Orthodox readings of the *Republic* take Socrates literally when he criticizes poetry for being merely imitative of the world which is in turn merely imitative of the Forms.<sup>112</sup> But let us do away with this literal schema. We cannot copy the Forms because the Forms are just metaphors for meaningful reality. A copy would either be meaningful reality itself or

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<sup>110</sup> Cf. *Apology* 20b: “Who has knowledge of that sort of virtue, that of a human being and a citizen?”

<sup>111</sup> Murdoch 1997, 436.

<sup>112</sup> See Ferrari 2005, Guthrie 1978 and 1975, and Shorey 1905 as examples.

non-meaningful since meaning comes from an embodied form (i.e., to copy a form is either to perfectly replicate it with the same meaning or approximate it and thus change the form and so the meaning).

Murdoch says that we see the Forms and become more like them, but what does that mean? If we perceive justice in a meaningful way, if we grasp what it might mean to be just, we become more just ourselves. This is the famous “problem of participation” raised in the *Parmenides*, but poetic philosophy is largely unbothered by it. How do we become more “Beethoven-y” when we perceive (hear) Beethoven’s *Seventh Symphony*? The melody affects us, we somatically internalize it by tapping our feet or swaying to the rhythm, our emotions or memories stir up, and so on. One resonant form sets another form to resonating. Grasping what meaningful justice looks like, *really grasping it*, makes us more just because we start to think about how to be that way ourselves, we start to notice more when something is *unjust*, we start to crave justice (the way we naturally crave all gestalt meanings).

That Plato uses myths and metaphors to try and convey this message is in some sense the most unremarkable thing in the world. We all use metaphors and images all the time, and much of the discussion thus far has tried to show that metaphor is basic to both understanding and experiences of meaning. Why shouldn’t Socrates use dazzling metaphoric images to explain his point to Phaedrus? How *else* would you explain love? We resort to metaphor when ordinary language fails, when all we can do is gesture—Murdoch here: “Art and the artist may indicate what lies just beyond the explanations

offered by ‘plain words’, once the words have carefully made a place for revelation.”<sup>113</sup> Nobody seriously wants to abandon language and analytic thought. We couldn’t even if we wanted to. Wertheimer’s idea of positive thinking and Socrates’ dialectic—these are both examples of how words carefully make “a place for revelation.” But Socrates in the *Phaedrus*’ palinode (and Plato everywhere) is an artist, trying to say in myth what he cannot say otherwise. And the fact that these myths and metaphors across the dialogues don’t all agree with one another need not bother us, as Murdoch notes:

As difficulties emerged Plato changed his imagery sometimes and finally abandoned philosophical argument altogether. He was always conscious of the possibility of being misunderstood, and the writer of the *Seventh Letter* expresses this anxiety with vehemence.<sup>114</sup>

There are countless metaphors Romeo could have used to describe what Juliet means to him. That he describes her as an angel a few lines after describing her as the sun doesn’t diminish either metaphor. This seems basic, but the point is important for poetic philosophy. Juliet cannot be an angel and the sun at the same time, nor can she strictly speaking be either one independently—but to say that there are contradictions and metaphors here is *not* to say that there is no meaning or truth. Plato changes his imagery when talking about the Forms, and this should only frustrate us if we misunderstand metaphor and have a narrow notion of truth.

## **§8, Conclusion**

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<sup>113</sup> Murdoch 1997, 434.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 443.

Socrates in the *Phaedrus* is a poet in the sense of *poiein* (“to do, make, bring into existence, fabricate”). He wrote no literal poems, but he crafts poetic speeches. Murdoch locates poetry in

...situations where what is wholly transcendent and invisible becomes partially, perhaps surprisingly, visible at points where the ‘frame’ does not quite ‘meet’. This image describes certain kinds of experience where it is as if, to use another image, the curtain blows in the wind (of spirit maybe), and we see more than we are supposed to. Plato’s myths indicate such visions... So deep is imagery in life that one may not always realise or know whether one is regarding something as itself or as an image. We are all artists and thinkers. We are all poets.<sup>115</sup>

The poet here is one who has the “sheer *nerve*” to try and make the transcendent perceptible. These “points where the frame does not quite meet” are the ghost ribs I mentioned in Chapter One, those places where a structure holds without any apparent reason. The poet and the metaphysician both see something and try to communicate it—this is the creative, poetic act. The poet uses images and myths to construct metaphors. Nobody can give a fully comprehensive account of justice or goodness or beauty. Socrates tries repeatedly across the Platonic dialogues, and in the attempt he is a poet, someone using ghost ribs to support an impossible structure, someone dropping metaphors like depth charges to try and illuminate in a flash of insight something that cannot quite be explained but nevertheless strikes us as meaningfully true.

Criticisms that devalue poetry or metaphor for not being direct or logical are toothless.<sup>116</sup> Resonant forms cannot be directly captured in words, so to criticize on this

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<sup>115</sup> Murdoch 1992, 505.

<sup>116</sup> Recall Daniel Werner’s criticism from Chapter Three: “...not comprehensive because an image can only offer an individual slice or reflection of the original reality...And it is not fully truthful because an image by its very nature is not identical to the original reality, and so partially depicts that reality as something that it is *not*” (Werner 2012, 56).

point is merely to describe. Socrates in the palinode wants to say something about the human soul, about human nature itself, and this is in the context of trying to say something *true* about love in contrast to the untrue speech he gave earlier. Just like Romeo reached for a metaphor to describe his love for Juliet when words failed, Socrates reaches for a metaphor when words fail him too. Anyone who says, “*Juliet is obviously not the sun. What you’re saying is fine as far as it goes, but you’re far from saying anything true and accurate*” misses the point of the metaphor, plugging their ears and closing their eyes when the ontological depth charge goes off—deaf to the resonances between things. And there is no way to analytically reason them out of this position. All we can do is gesture and say “look again.”

I understand the Forms as an attempt to anchor meaning, to give some firm grounding for the seemingly various ways we talk and think (e.g., using the word “beautiful” in different but mutually understandable ways). Analytic thought says that Plato answers this challenge by positing eternal and transcendent paradigms of meaning called the Forms. It then proceeds from this point to a two-realms doctrine of truth versus appearance. From this reading of Plato spill countless problems bequeathed to European philosophy, everything from realism versus nominalism to rationalism versus empiricism. But what if we go back to the text and look at the Forms as they’re actually described? What if we never take that first step of assuming the Forms are literal things floating up above the sky? What if we recognize the Forms as a type of metaphor? Transcendence as getting around our cognitive clutter? I am shifting a set of alliances: metaphor and imagination join forces with realism and truth. I think Plato’s Forms demonstrate this. In



fact, if we absolutely had to speculate about Plato's own motives, I might go so far as to say that the dialogues (at least the *Phaedrus*) are trying to show (not tell) just this shift. In other words, the dialogues show us what it's like to think and seek for truth—and they show us that this seeking is poetic, taking place through metaphoric images.

This goes against more scholarship than I can possibly mention. The standard narrative is that Plato writes philosophical dialogues to wrest truth away from the poets who were its traditional arbiters and keepers in Greece.<sup>117</sup> “*So then when you say that Plato uses poetry to try and get at the truth, aren't you ignoring real historical differences? Aren't you basically saying that Plato is not so different from the tragedians before him?*” Well, yes and no. Plato is *not* so different from the tragedians as we like to suppose. Plato and the tragic poets both wrote, they both drew on historical and mythic sources, they were both steeped in the literary and cultural traditions of their day, they both were viewed as sources of education, they both wrote with careful attention to creative style, and so on. Plato, we even know, was originally on track to become an accomplished tragic poet before meeting Socrates.<sup>118</sup>

Plato differs from the traditional poets not in his willingness to write poetically but in his recognition that meaning and truth are inherently ineffable. I think that Plato knew that perceiving truth and securing thought from error are very much not the same. I think that Plato wanted to describe thinking itself as the discernment of the lineaments of reality, and he knew that such discernment resists language. Maybe the tragedians and lyricists and rhapsodes all knew this too, and it seems likely that me that Heraclitus and

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<sup>117</sup> Some “major hits” in the scholarship on this topic, for me anyway, include Rowe 2007, Nightingale 2004 and 1995, Detienne 1999, Roochnik 1990, Nussbaum 1986, Havelock 1963, Werner 1945, and many more.

<sup>118</sup> Puchner 2010 dramatizes this story nicely.

Parmenides in their own ways were onto something similar.<sup>119</sup> But Plato, I think, was the first writer to come at the problem from multiple angles, with multiple questions, over an expansive corpus. As I suggested in Chapter Two, the torqued unity of the *Phaedrus* and of Plato's writing in general, is a sort of love letter, a dialectical form meant to echo conversation with Socrates, that gestalt thinker par excellence. Perhaps Plato thought that if he could capture something of dialoguing with Socrates he could also capture something of truth. It comes with a risk: risk of being misunderstood, of being set upon by logicians, of singing out only to have nobody answer back.

I believe this is the very insight of the *Phaedrus*, articulated so stirringly by Nussbaum some three decades ago: "this best human life [in the *Phaedrus*] is unstable, always prey to conflict," in other words: it lacks the stability we demand of analytic thought.<sup>120</sup> The test of experiencing meaning is how or whether we are changed by the encounter. The lover in the *Phaedrus* is changed by the encounter with the beautiful beloved: physical and mental pain, swirling memories, the growth of wings, the ascension towards the Forms, the ignition of the engines of philosophy.<sup>121</sup> I take this to all be a metaphorical and true way of describing how an encounter with a resonant Form can be so strikingly clear that we alter our perceptions in a flash—a beautiful, sometimes painful flash, a flash that might indeed be wrong and that resists linguistic analysis, but that nevertheless puts air in our lungs and wings on our soul.

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<sup>119</sup> Adluri 2012 offers a reading of Parmenides that aligns with some of my claims about Plato, albeit in quite different language and with quite different focus (e.g., a strong Heideggerian slant).

<sup>120</sup> Nussbaum 1986: 221.

<sup>121</sup> *Phr.* 249ff.

## CHAPTER V

### PERCEIVING AND SELFING IN THE QI WU LUN 齊物論

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

W.B. Yeats, *Among School Children*

被笔勾掉的山水      The landscape crossed out with a pen  
在这里重现            reappears here.

Bei Dao 北岛, “Untitled” 无题

To explain what I do is simple enough. A scholar is someone who takes a position. From high position, certain lines become visible. You will at first think I am painting the lines myself; it's not so. I merely know where to stand to see the lines that are there. And the mysterious thing, it is a very mysterious thing, is how these lines do paint themselves.

Anne Carson, ‘The Life of Towns’, *Plainwater*

### §1, Preamble

This chapter argues for the sort of realism and perceptive knowing I have discussed in Plato in the *Zhuangzi*, specifically in its second chapter, the *Qi wu lun* 齊物論 (“The Sorting That Evens Things Out”). I think the *Qi wu lun* has several good illustrations of the idea that to perceive a resonant form involves a co-respondence with it. In the previous chapter, I talked about this in the context of Plato’s Forms: how perceiving something of resonant justice can make us more just, for example. In this chapter, I want to pay special attention to what Iris Murdoch calls “un-selfing,” what Simone Weil calls

“decreation”: the loss of self that allows for clearer perception and then responsiveness to the external world, a responsiveness that in turn affects the self.

I examine this theme in three of textual moments in the *Qi wu lun* 齊物論: the butterfly dream passage, Nanguo Ziqi’s loss of self, and the pipes analogy given by Nanguo. These three moments in the text fit together to illustrate what is maybe the fundamental difference between my poetic philosophy and modern professional philosophy: the former holds philosophy to be the business of perceiving truths understood as meaningful coherences (*tian li* 天理) while the latter holds philosophy to be the business of “getting it right” or insulating thought from error. Thus, as is the case throughout this dissertation, my discussion here is two-pronged: (1) offering an interpretation of the text itself and (2) using that interpretation to show something about poetic philosophy more generally. My hope is that both goals proceed simultaneously since it is impossible for me to untangle them.

Perhaps the most widespread understanding of the *Qi wu lun* 齊物論 is that it argues against imposing human categories onto the world: we talk about things as if they are good or bad, true or false, but this is mere projection of our human values onto an indifferent world. These interpretations often come with a warning against anthropocentrism: humans wrongly take themselves to be the measure of things, and we can correct this by nudging our perspective. Franklin Perkins, for example, describes the *Zhuangzi* as follows:

...the *Zhuangzi* rejects the optimism that takes the world as conforming to human concerns. The text emphasizes the inevitability of death and the failure of our ethical

projects, grounded ultimately in the incommensurability between human categories and the complexity and indifference of the world itself.<sup>1</sup>

A prime example of this theme is a famous passage in the *Qi wu lun* typically marshaled into arguments about relativism (and cited in Perkins' argument):

[Wang Ni said,] “Now let me ask you some questions. If a person sleeps somewhere damp, their back hurts and they wake up like a stiff corpse, but is this so for a bottom-feeding fish? If a person sleeps in a tree, they're scared and trembling, but is this so for a monkey? Out of these three creatures, which one dwells in the right place [三者孰知正處]? People eat the flesh of vegetarian animals, deer eat grass, centipedes savor snakes, hawks devour mice. Out of these four creatures, which one knows the right taste of food [四者孰知正味]?<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*, we learn that the tall, straight tree might *seem* like the better tree, but that's only true from the perspective of a human who may want to use the lumber: from the tree's point of view, it is much better to be bent and crooked because then nobody will chop you down to build a house.<sup>3</sup> The *Qi wu lun* delights in showing how human distinctions, judgments, and categories fail to find purchase on the world as it really is, and the result is that scholars often take the text as endorsing either skepticism or relativism, a denial of real objective meaning in the world. I think this is a mistake and will offer an alternative.

A key theme of this chapter is that our experience of meaningfulness resounds such that we find ourselves changed by it. Chapter Four showed how this happens in Plato

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<sup>1</sup> Perkins 2011, 83.

<sup>2</sup> *Zhuangzi* 2 (*Qi wu lun* 齊物論), 102. All citations for the *Zhuangzi* are from *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 edited by Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 and arranged by Wang Xiaoyu 王孝魚 (2007). I give the traditional chapter number and title followed by the page number to that edition. Translations are my own unless otherwise stated and frequently draw on Watson 2013 and Ziporyn 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *Zhuangzi* 1 (*Xiao yao you* 逍遙遊), 44.

and in Murdoch with images: we create them, and they in turn shape us. Here, I will focus even more closely on the way that the self is shaped by meaningful resonances in the world. Nanguo Ziqi loses himself (*wu sang wo* 吾喪我), I shall argue, because a “decreated” self mirrors the emptiness of the world. In Chapter Two, I talked about ensouled discourse (*empsukhon logon*) in the *Phaedrus*, and how language is alive or ensouled when it addresses someone specific and elicits a response. That kind of call and response *is* the experience of meaning, and it is also the experience of self. I follow Wittgenstein in arguing that self is something we *do*, not something we *have*—and what does it look like when someone selfs? It looks like a conversation, like a lively response, like harmonizing, like accepting someone’s invitation to dance.<sup>4</sup> Nanguo becomes empty as a response to perceiving the world: and that response *is* self. Importantly, the emptiness here is not a kind of Parmenidean nothingness: it is an emptiness in the sense of open space needed to move, or the emptiness inside a bell that lets it resound. And when Nanguo encounters a world full of such resonances, he himself resonates in kind, he *corresponds*. And in so resonating, Nanguo moves, which is another way of expressing or demonstrating aliveness, ensoulment—selfing.

## §2, Butterfly Dream

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<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein 1953: “§455. We want to say: ‘When we mean something, it’s like going up to someone, it’s not having a dead picture (of any kind).’ We go up to the thing we mean.” “§456. When one means something, it is oneself meaning; so one is oneself in motion. One is rushing ahead and so cannot also observe oneself rushing ahead.” “§457. Yes: meaning something is like going up to someone.”

昔者莊周夢為胡蝶，栩栩然胡蝶也，自喻適志與！不知周也。俄然覺，則蘧蘧然周也。不知周之夢為胡蝶與，胡蝶之夢為周與？周與胡蝶，則必有分矣。此之謂物化。<sup>5</sup>

Once, Zhuang Zhou fell into a dream—and then there was a butterfly, a fluttering butterfly, self-content in accord with its intentions. One does not know whether a Zhou dreams and then there is a butterfly, or whether a butterfly dreams and then there is a Zhou. When there is a Zhou and a butterfly, there has to be a distinction. This is called the changing of things.

The butterfly dream passage is a kind of coda to the *Qi wu lun* 齊物論.<sup>6</sup> I believe that it illustrates a kind of realism: the external world is really out there, full of real and distinct things with value and meaning apart from humans. The problem is that the butterfly passage has often been read in precisely the opposite way. Some interpret the passage for relativism: we cannot distinguish between being a butterfly or a human, so we may as well throw up our hands. Others interpret the passage for skepticism: we cannot really know the nature of things. I will draw on the *Zhuangzi*'s oldest extant commentator Guo Xiang 郭象 to show that the butterfly passage actually exhibits a kind of realism, not a skeptical hopelessness. I will then depart from Guo, who's defense against skepticism ends up leading to relativism. In place of that, I propose my own poetic philosophy, which rejects the very framework required for relativism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Zhuangzi* 2 (*Qi wu lun* 齊物論), 123. Translation from Möller 1999, 446–447. I do not entirely agree with Möller's translation but offer it as a decent attempt to translate the passage without too much modern philosophical baggage. See below.

<sup>6</sup> My arguments here grew out of a dissatisfaction with translations and interpretations of the butterfly story, which is why I start my chapter with the end of Zhuangzi's chapter. My thinking grew organically in this direction. It is a way of being faithful to the direction of my thought, and I do not mean to suggest that the order of the text doesn't matter.

<sup>7</sup> My focus throughout is not actually on relativism or skepticism. There is a great deal of scholarship on these topics in Zhuangzi, but I think both problems arise fundamentally from a model of thinking that poetic philosophy rejects.

To give an idea of how most scholars understand the butterfly passage, here are three other translations, all of which commit a misreading highlighted by Guo Xiang:

**Herbert Giles:**

Once upon a time, I, Chuang Tzu, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of following my fancies as a butterfly, and was unconscious of my individuality as a man. Suddenly, I awaked, and there I lay, myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man. Between a man and a butterfly there is necessarily a barrier. The transition is called Metempsychosis.<sup>8</sup>

**A.C. Graham:**

Last night Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, spirits soaring he was a butterfly (is it that in showing what he was he suited his own fancy?), and did not know about Zhou. When all of a sudden he awoke, he was Zhou with all his wits about him. He does not know whether he is Zhou who dreams he is a butterfly or a butterfly who dreams he is Zhou. Between Zhou and the butterfly there was necessarily a dividing; just this is what is meant by the transformation of things.<sup>9</sup>

**Burton Watson:**

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up, and there he was, solid and unmissable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn't know if he were Zhuang Zhou who had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and a butterfly, there must be *some* distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things.<sup>10</sup>

Guo Xiang raises a key point here: “the not-knowing about a butterfly at this moment is not different from the not-knowing about a Zhuang Zhou during the time of the

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<sup>8</sup> Giles 1926, 47. Giles' influential translation for a long time set the stage for European engagement with Daoism, serving as Martin Buber's main source for his influential *Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschuang-Tse* (*Speeches and Allegories of Zhuangzi*), which too uncritically aligned Zhuangzi's ideas with Western theological ones. Buber, in turn, provided fodder for Heidegger's philosophy, the East Asian sources of which have now been extensively charted. See Hermann 1992 for a dissertation tracing the influence of Zhuangzi through Buber and into European philosophy. See May 1996 and Parkes 1990 for the influence of Zhuangzi on Heidegger and European philosophy generally.

<sup>9</sup> Graham 1981, 61. I include Graham's translation because Graham is still to this day probably the single most influential interpreter of the *Zhuangzi* in English. Even when disagreeing with him, many philosophers continue to use his translation and rely on his sinological expertise.

<sup>10</sup> Watson 2013, 18. Watson's translation of the *Zhuangzi* is probably the most widely anthologized and read.



dream.”<sup>11</sup> Guo is clear that the awakened Zhou knows nothing of the dream just as the butterfly knows nothing of the sleeping Zhou. Without this awareness of the other, *neither of them has any reason to doubt their own existence.*<sup>12</sup> There is nothing in the story itself to suggest that a butterfly, in the midst of its happy fluttering, suddenly spirals into existential doubt. Guo insists that there is neither reason to think that Zhou remembers being a butterfly nor reason to think that a butterfly remembers being Zhou.

Giles’ translation contains thirteen explicit mentions of “I” or “me” or “myself.” Classical Chinese grammar requires no explicit subject, a syntactical feature of which the *Zhuangzi* takes full advantage. English, however, generally cannot abide the lack of subject, and so we can be left with the impression that there is a sort of Cartesian subject that persists from wakefulness into the dream and then back out of the dream again. Giles goes so far as to insert the term “metempsychosis,” literally a transformation of the soul or self, even though the original text has no soul or self to undergo such a transformation. Neither Graham nor Watson are as bad, and they both avoid the unwarranted first-person, but they still present the passage as something that looks like a thought experiment in Cartesian skepticism, especially for their readers who might not know Classical Chinese.<sup>13</sup> The initial translation I gave in this section is Hans-Georg Moeller’s, and he makes a conscious effort to get rid of the appearance of a continuous self in the passage, noting that Guo Xiang writes: “being one, there is no knowledge of the other.

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<sup>11</sup> Guo 2007, 124: 今之不知胡蝶，無異於夢之不知周也。

<sup>12</sup> In the previous chapter I quoted Wittgenstein’s point that even doubt requires certainty.

<sup>13</sup> Chen 2005, Chinn 1997, Goodman 1985, Hansen 1983, to name just a few, all talk about and read the passage in similar ways.

Being a butterfly when dreaming is genuine.”<sup>14</sup> Guo sees things in this passage “at their own time, everything completely in accord with their intentions.”<sup>15</sup> That is, during the dream, the butterfly is what it is of its own accord and intent, without any qualities of Zhuang Zhou, and vice versa.

Guo Xiang’s reading accepts that there are real and meaningful distinctions in the world, but it leaves us the problem of how to adjudicate between them.

夫覺夢之分，無異於死生之辯也。今所以自喻適志，由其分定，非由無分也。<sup>16</sup>

The distinction between waking and dreaming is no different than the separation between death and life. Now, the reason that one can act in accordance with one’s intent follows from these firm distinctions—not from there *not* being any distinctions.

We see here that Guo insists on a world full of distinctions, which goes against those interpreters who think that all distinctions are merely human projections onto the world. Guo is no skeptic: he believes in a meaningful external world, and so the butterfly story is not meant as a blurring or doubting of categories. The butterfly and Zhuang Zhou are *not* the same entity, and there *is no* ghostly soul or ego that persists through these transformations. The question is: without this kind of objective viewpoint, how can we judge *anything at all* in this world of distinct entities?

Guo Xiang’s answer: “*We can’t.*” His commentary inaugurated relativist interpretations of the *Zhuangzi* (and because of his role in editing the extant text, when we

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<sup>14</sup> Guo 2007, 125: 方為此則不知彼，夢為胡蝶是也。 Translation from Moeller 1999, 441.

<sup>15</sup> Guo 2007, 124: 而各適一時之志，則無以明胡蝶之不夢為周矣。

<sup>16</sup> Guo 2007, 124.

read Zhuangzi, we are in a substantial way reading Guo Xiang).<sup>17</sup> Brook Ziporyn remarks of Guo's long commentarial shadow:

All later commentators may be assumed to have studied Guo's commentary closely. Guo's staunchly anti-metaphysical, anti-foundationalist, and anti-theistic interpretation of Zhuangzi rejects any notion of the [*Dao*] as creator or source of beings... Instead, he stresses the concept of spontaneity, or "self-so," (*ziran* 自然)... Guo's expositions on the theme of the self-so, and his uncompromising relativism, remain unsurpassed among Zhuangzi's commentators.<sup>18</sup>

This description fits with Guo's point about the butterfly story lacking any transcendent self. Some further remarks that illustrate Guo's relativism include:

Every creature without exception considers itself right and the others wrong, praising itself and defaming others. It is in precisely this sense that, although each embraces a different definition of right and wrong, self and other are exactly equal.<sup>19</sup>

What the Confucians and Mohists consider right [*shi* 是] is considering something right and something else wrong [*fei* 非]. Not considering anything right or wrong is what they consider wrong. So to affirm what they negate and negate what they affirm, we must illuminate the sense in which there is no right or wrong... The rights are not right and the wrongs are not wrong, so there is no right and no wrong.<sup>20</sup>

All things are a single rightness, each is just "so [*ran* 然]," as things are made thus by calling them thus. Each thing is thus; each time is perfectly formed: this is what is here called purity.<sup>21</sup>

As Ziporyn says, Guo's biggest thematic contribution to the *Zhuangzi* was an insistence on *ziran* 自然 ("spontaneity" or "self-so-ness") as the key idea of the text. Roughly speaking, a thing that happens of its own accord on its own terms cannot be wrong, and so the

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<sup>17</sup> Ziporyn 2003 is the only book-length study in English known to me that explores Guo Xiang's thought in its own right, in relation to but distinct from Zhuangzi.

<sup>18</sup> Ziporyn 2009a, 222–223.

<sup>19</sup> As given in Ziporyn 2009a, 135—comment on the title of chapter two, *Qiwulun* 齊物論.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 144–145—comment on the "pipes of Heaven" (*tianlai* 天籟) passage in the *Qiwulun* 齊物論.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 158—comment on the butterfly dream passage in the *Qiwulun* 齊物論.

unfolding of multiple phenomena at the same time necessitates multiple perspectives none of which can be wrong. The focus on *ziran* 自然 ends up leading to something that looks an awful lot like relativism. I will return to *ziran* 自然 later when discussing the pipes of Heaven, but for now I will just note that Guo Xiang defends the butterfly passage against skepticism by offering it up to the ravages of relativism instead. Far from thwarting our ability to distinguish amongst things, the passage shows us how vital distinctions are. The trick, then, is to figure out a way to acknowledge the distinctions that exist in the world without throwing our hands up in relativistic despair.

Acknowledging distinctions means acknowledging that the world has distinct forms (*tian li* 天理), that when we encounter meaning or value we are not merely projecting. I do not think, for example, the passage is meant to prod us into imagining what it would be like to be a butterfly. Michael Puett, for example, writes the following:

...by offering [the butterfly dream] story, Zhuangzi proposes an as-if question: What would it be like if I looked at the world as if I were a butterfly dreaming I am a human being? For that moment, we suspend reality and enter an alternate universe where we expand our ability to imagine all sorts of as-if possibilities in the broadest sense. The entire cosmos is open to us; a world in which everything is flowing into everything else... The key is the break of perspective itself.<sup>22</sup>

What would it be like to be a butterfly?<sup>23</sup> I do not think we can answer this question. We can draft a list of how a butterfly's sensory organs work or pour over diagrams of butterfly physiology, but this will not give us any meaningful knowledge of what it is like

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<sup>22</sup> Puett and Loh, 2016, 150.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Nagel 1979, a now-canonical essay arguing that our inescapable subjectivity prevents us from ever knowing what it is like to be another sort of consciousness (a bat, in Nagel's famous example). I generally agree with Nagel's point here.

to *be* a butterfly. Any answer to the question will be fanciful and unrealistic. Here I think Iris Murdoch's distinction, seen in the previous chapter, between imagination and fantasy is helpful:

To mark the distances involved we need, for purposes of discussion, two words for two concepts: a distinction between egoistic *fantasy* and liberated truth-seeking *imagination*... one somewhat mechanically generating narrowly banal false pictures (the ego as all-powerful), and the other freely and creatively exploring the world, moving toward the expression and elucidation (and in art celebration) or what is true and deep.<sup>24</sup>

“*What is it like to be a butterfly?*” is a question of fantasy because it does not help us join with the world as it really is, it does not clear our vision in a way that helps us see. We can only ever fantasize about what it's like to be a butterfly: we are not an unchanging or transcendent self that can swap “human glasses” for “butterfly glasses.” The butterfly passage ends with the phrase *wu hua* 物化 (“transformation of things”). If all things are in flux, then the self must also be constantly changing. If your relationship towards the world is about “getting it right,” then it will be hard to pin things down since they're always transforming. But if your relationship towards the world is about trying to *see* the world, even as it shifts and flows, then *wu hua* 物化 is no impediment, nor is the absence of transcendent self.

### §3, Language Games

Guo Xiang asks us to consider how, given that things in the world (*wu* 物) exist in distinct independence while constantly transforming (*wu hua* 物化), we can make meaningful discernments—especially since we ourselves are just one of these things (*wu*

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<sup>24</sup> Murdoch 1992, 321.

物). For convenience, I have framed this as a rejection of any Archimedean point: there is no stable and separate self from which we can analyze and verify things. Ironically, the *acceptance* of an Archimedean viewpoint might be what leads to skepticism and relativism: if we posit some God's eye point of view from which we can verify all our perceptions and thoughts, we are left with a responsibility to do just that—but we can't. Substantial dimensions of human thought and experience resist rational verification, logic, and language, and they resist on a fundamental level such that the thoughts are actually diminished when we try to analyze them. But we can abandon the fantasy of a transcendent, objective viewpoint without also abandoning the idea of truth and meaningfulness. We are not left with an “anything goes” situation. Wittgenstein's notion of language games can help clarify this.

Language game refers not just to a literal language but a “whole, consisting of the language and the actions into which it is woven.”<sup>25</sup> Language is a fundamental activity of human beings, and if we want to understand it, Wittgenstein thinks, we must see it embedded in the full context of human life. “The term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.”<sup>26</sup> We must view language as part of a complex web of rituals, practices, communities, and other cultural phenomena. We must become anthropologists of a sort and see humans as inextricably contextualized creatures.

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<sup>25</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* I.7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, I.23.

Wittgenstein describes the whole history of European philosophy as an attempt to get outside of all that cultural context and obtain an Archimedean viewpoint. Richard Rorty, a follower of Wittgenstein in this area, compares the world to a complex jigsaw puzzle. Philosophers, Rorty says, are trying to get high up above the table so they can look down and see more precisely how all the pieces fit together.<sup>27</sup> The orthodox Plato tries to do just this in obtaining the Forms (although, as I have argued, this reading of Plato results from an inattention to the form of his texts). Wittgenstein breaks from this philosophical tradition:

...if the words “language,” “experience,” “world” have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words “table,” “lamp,” “door”...

When philosophers use a word—“knowledge,” “being,” “object,” “I,” “proposition,” “name”—and try to grasp the essence of a thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home? What we do is bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use...

When I talk about language (words, sentences etc.) I must speak the language of every day...

One might think: if philosophy speaks of the use of “philosophy” there must be a second-order philosophy. But it is not so: it is, rather, like the case of orthography, which deals with the word “orthography” among others without then being second-order.<sup>28</sup>

We may think we’re pursuing the absolute or transcendent truth, but Wittgenstein says that what we’re *actually* doing becomes clear only when we see how that pursuit is embedded in all sorts of inherited practices, including language. We cannot talk about our way of life from the outside. “Any attempt to *say* what our form of life is like will itself

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<sup>27</sup> Rorty 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* I.97, 116, 120, 121.

be part of the form of life.”<sup>29</sup> The immediate objection to this—an objection I have often wrestled with—is that it confines us to relativism. Rorty in particular falls victim to this accusation.<sup>30</sup> In the terms laid out above: how do we avoid being relativists if we agree with Guo Xiang’s observation that the butterfly and Zhuang Zhou each have no recognition of the other? If neither can step outside their own reality to see the other and thus begin to doubt, how are we *not* left with relativism? If we cannot climb up a ladder and look down, how can we possibly judge which puzzle pieces are the right ones?

Wittgenstein is not simplistically saying that because there are multiple ways of life we cannot ever choose between them. Jonathan Lear gives two examples of this, from arithmetic and logic. Suppose we ask someone the following questions.

**“What does 4 plus 5 equal?”**

Person X: “9.”

Person Y: *“Anything, so long as we are all playing the same language game.”*

**“What follows from P and If P, then Q?”**

Person X: “Q.”

Person Y: *“Anything follows, so long as we are all playing the same language game.”*

Person X obviously gives the correct answers, and anyone who tried to give different answers would be wrong, but with the right understanding of Wittgenstein’s language game, we might be persuaded that Person Y is also giving an acceptable answer. If we change the rules and terms and methods and practices of our arithmetic, it’s possible that  $4 + 5$  *wouldn’t* equal 9. If we all accepted an alternative but coherent way of life, if we

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<sup>29</sup> Lear 1998, 249. I follow parts of Lear’s reading of Wittgenstein throughout.

<sup>30</sup> Ramberg 2009 provides a helpful overview.



were all minded other than we are, perhaps the rules would be different and the basic logic of *modus ponens* would not hold.

This is not at first pass terribly meaningful: Person Y is really only saying, “*if things were other than what they are...then they would be different.*” No great insight there. But the crux for Wittgenstein is that such an alternative scenario is nonsensical to us—we literally cannot imagine it, cannot see it, cannot make sense of it. Try to imagine a world where four added to five gives you something besides nine. Participating in a language game or way of life is not just one option among many that we can explore or turn on and off at will. As we wander through life, bumping into ideas and practices and peoples, we try to figure out what does and doesn’t make sense to us—that is what it means to explore our own mindedness, our own language game. We cannot meaningfully know what it is like to be “other-minded” because as soon as we start to drift towards the outer limits of *our* mindedness, we also start to drift into incoherence.

If we met an isolated, other-minded tribe somewhere, what would it be like to try and explain *modus ponens* to them? Imagine that the people of this tribe just cannot be made to understand that *Q* follows from *P* and that *If P, then Q*. What else could we do? We would have to simply throw up our hands and say, “*Well, this is how we do it.*” We saw some of this in Chapter One with analytic philosophers like W.V.O. Quine and Susan Haack talking about formal logic:

...logic is the systematic study of the logical truths. Pressed further, I would say that a sentence is logically true if all sentences with its grammatical structure are true. Pressed further still, I would say to read this book.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Quine 1970, xi.

...because I have to begin somewhere, I shall take for granted an intuitive idea of what it is to be a formal system.<sup>32</sup>

Logic is a powerful tool, but only if we first accept its fundamental axioms, only if we are so minded, able to play its language game. For someone already in that language game, formal logic can be clarified or explained, we can train members of that language game to acquire more respect for and fluency in logic. But how do we convince someone who isn't already inside that world that *modus ponens* makes sense? Certainly not with logic. Gestalt insights are one possibility because they rely on someone suddenly seeing how something hangs together, but there is no argument or instruction manual for inducing a gestalt insight.

Does any of this mean that logic is unhelpful in saying meaningful or true things? Of course not. Does any of this mean that the relativist is right: that there is, in the end, no truth of the matter? No. The incoherence of formal logic for another way of life doesn't negate its coherence for ours. But more to the point: we cannot imagine this hypothetical tribe that doesn't understand *modus ponens* anyway. What would they be like? We cannot answer. The other-minded tribe is no more than a heuristic device, and heuristic devices need not be true so long as they help us understand.<sup>33</sup> In this case, the hypothesis of an isolated tribe with another way of life is a heuristic device that helps us clarify our *own* way of life—in Socratic terms: helps us undertake self-examination.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Haack 1978, 3.

<sup>33</sup> My thanks to Lisa Raphals for this helpful point.

<sup>34</sup> Raphals 1994 is a touchstone in comparative scholarship and contains a framework for thinking of self-examination in a sense common to Socrates and Zhuangzi (although this is not Raphals' explicit argument). Moeller 2008 articulates an "idiotic irony" in Zhuangzi with brief comparison to Socratic irony.

There is no sharp dividing line between our way of life and that of another tribe. The border between mindedness and incoherence is not marked with a wall of armed guards and lots of helpful signage, but this borderland is precisely the territory through which philosophy ought to roam. Poetic philosophy is thinking in love with clarity, and you can only love (in the sense of *erōs*, “desire”) what you don’t already have. Philosophy wanders the borderlands: we encounter puzzling and seemingly incoherent language games, and the task of philosophy is to try and make them cohere, try to make them clear, which is to say, make them strike us, make them mean. None of this demands that all things are equally meaningful or true.

If human thought is basically analytic, then things like truth and meaningfulness are wholly subject to analysis, expression in language, logical and empirical verification. On this model, it makes sense to ask whether the butterfly or whether Zhuang Zhou is the real thing. Guo Xiang throws a monkey wrench into this when he points out that the text does not allow for a transcendent self: there is no viewpoint from which the isolated self can comfortably analyze the butterfly and Zhuang Zhou. Guo takes this to mean that the butterfly and Zhuang Zhou are both equally real or true, that life and death are both equally real or true, that there is no way to adjudicate. But if we approach the text from the beginning by admitting that human thought is not limited to analysis, we get something different. Truth and meaningfulness are not reduced to verification but now include perception, an awareness of how things hang together. Free of the burden of verification, we no longer need a God’s eye view from which we can see whether we’re correctly fitting one piece with another piece; we can focus less on being right or wrong

and more on paying attention to what's there, even if we only see what's there from our own subjective viewpoints. The opening scene of the *Qi wu lun* 齊物論 will help me explain this idea.

#### §4, “I Lost Myself”

If there is no transcendent self, how should we understand and use the term and concept of self? The opening scene of the *Qi wu lun* 齊物論 raises these concerns explicitly when the character Nanguo Ziqi says, “*I lost myself*” (*wu sang wo* 吾喪我). I want to try to understand what that might mean, especially given what I have just argued about the butterfly passage. I have argued for philosophy as the search for clarity, and Nanguo has a profound experience of clarity, an experience he expresses through a loss of self. The resonant clarity of the world strikes him, and his loss of self mirrors the resonant clarity of the world—he responds to the world. This responding—the action itself—is self. So how should we understand self if not as a transcendent thing? As resonance. Wittgenstein again helps here, articulating a notion of self something we do, not something we have. First, the text:

南郭子綦隱机而坐，仰天而噓，蒼焉似喪其耦。顏成子游立侍乎前，曰：「何居乎？形固可使如槁木，而心固可使如死灰乎？今之隱机者，非昔之隱机者也。子綦曰：「偃，不亦善乎，而問之也！今者吾喪我，汝知之乎？女聞人籟而未聞地籟，女聞地籟而未聞天籟夫！」<sup>35</sup>

Nanguo Ziqi was leaning against his armrest on the ground, gazing upward and releasing his breath into the heavens above—all wispy and scattered, as if loosed from a partner.

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<sup>35</sup> *Zhuangzi* 2 (*Qi wu lun* 齊物論), 48–50.

Yangcheng Ziyou stood in attendance before him and asked, “Who or what is this here? Can the body really be made like a withered tree, the mind like dead ashes? What leans on that armrest right now is not what leaned on it before.”

Nano Ziqi said, “It’s a good question you ask! Just now, I lost myself. But how could you know that? You’ve heard the pipes of man but not yet heard the pipes of earth. Or you’ve heard the pipes of earth but not yet heard the pipes of Heaven.”

“I lost myself” makes a certain intuitive sense in English: one thinks maybe of “zoning out” or perhaps a kind of daydreaming, but philosophically, what does Nanguo Ziqi mean exactly? Taken literally, the phrase is a kind of nonsense, and our intuitive understanding in English relies on a somewhat figurative reading. What could it mean to lose one’s self? I propose that what happens to Nanguo is what Murdoch calls “unselfing” and what Simone Weil calls “decreation.” Nanguo experiences a temporary burst of clarity, a breakthrough of his cognitive clutter, and in that clarity, he more attentively perceives reality—and as we shall see in the pipes of Heaven metaphor later on, he actually *becomes more like* the reality he sees. Before we get to that, however, I have been arguing against any sort of transcendent self in the butterfly dream passage. The idea of decreation might seem to require a Cartesian-style self to be decreated. I want to show why this is not the case and how Nanguo illustrates just that.

How we understand *wu* 吾 and *wo* 我 determines a good deal of how we understand the passage. *Wu* 吾 occurs about twice as often in the *Zhuangzi* as *wo* 我, the latter of which features as the grammatical subject in only about one-fifth of its appearances.<sup>36</sup> The Classical Chinese of Zhuangzi’s time has no rules demanding that *wu*

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<sup>36</sup> Information calculated from the “full-text search” function on the Chinese Text Project: <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi>.

吾 always be a subject pronoun and *wǒ* 我 a reflexive pronoun (“myself”), so maybe it’s just a matter of empty stylistics on the author’s part, a desire to avoid writing *wu sang wu 吾喪吾*? “Empty stylistics” goes against the whole thrust of my poetic philosophy, but more compellingly, if *wu* 吾 and *wǒ* 我 are entirely interchangeable, then we are left with a literal reading of the passage somewhat along the lines of “*I lost I*” or “*I lost me*.” Given their regular usages in the *Zhuangzi*, we need not take this route.

Thomas Ming helpfully outlines three possible interpretations of the line: Single-Reference, Double-Reference, and Non-Reference views.<sup>37</sup> The Single-Reference view holds that the *wu* 吾 and the *wǒ* 我 in Nanguo Ziqi’s remark both refer to the same thing: Ziqi’s self or soul or mind. This would require, as we just saw, that *wu* 吾 and *wǒ* 我 are more or less interchangeable. The Double-Reference view holds that each of these pronouns refers to something different, that one of them (the *wu* 吾) is somehow getting rid of the other (the *wǒ* 我).<sup>38</sup> Ming himself espouses the Non-Reference view: both the *wu* 吾 and the *wǒ* 我 refer to nothing. My own view is a kind of Non-Reference one, but whereas Ming thinks *wu* 吾 and *wǒ* 我 actually *refer* to nothingness (i.e., a thing called “no self”), I think that *wu* 吾 does not *refer* at all. If the function of the first-person pronoun

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<sup>37</sup> Ming 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Double-Reference interpreters include Lynn 2012, Møllgaard 2007, Slingerland 2004, Cook 2003, Jochim 1998, Kjellberg 1993, Hall 1992, and Wu 1990. The most well-known example in North America from Chinese language scholarship is Chen Guying 陳鼓應 (Chen 2001). The Double-Reference view is by far the commonest in the current scholarship, however, most of these scholars pay scant attention to the philological issues of the *wu sang wǒ 吾喪我* line, focusing instead on elaborating their own models of self in *Zhuangzi*.

(*wu* 吾 or “I”) is to refer to something called “self,” then we are left having to explain what that self is, but since I have argued against such a self in the butterfly passage, that is not a position I want to be in.

Ming argues that “few interpreters are content to subscribe unreservedly” to the Single-Reference view since “even if...*wo* merely serves as anaphora for *wu*, ‘lose’ is an odd verb to connect them together because a reflexive understanding of ‘lose’, instead of other verbs such as ‘harm’ or ‘hate’, will render the statement senseless, similar to the claim ‘I no longer exist.’”<sup>39</sup> In other words, if *wu* 吾 and *wo* 我 refer to the same thing, then we are left with a kind of gobbledygook sentence. It makes no sense to lose myself literally the way I might hate myself literally. Fair enough, but why the assumption that Nanguo Ziqi is speaking literally (i.e., saying something like “*I no longer exist*”)? To lose something does not necessarily cause that thing to stop existing, and this is as true of car keys as it is of my sense of self. At any rate, Ming is right that the difficulties presented in taking *wu* 吾 and *wo* 我 to mean the same thing tend to lead scholars towards the Double-Reference view.

One immediate problem with the Double-Reference view is that it brings Western, usually modern, terminology to bear on a Classical Chinese text: self, ego, id, soul, spirit, and so on. Chris Jochim, for example, extensively criticizes the deployment of Western-style self in reading Zhuangzi, proposing instead “flow experience.”<sup>40</sup> This, however,

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<sup>39</sup> Ming 2016, 60.

<sup>40</sup> Jochim 1998, 62–68.

raises the question of what exactly is experiencing flow—could it be...a self? And does losing oneself in a flow experience lead to some sort of spiritual transformation (and if so, what is being transformed?) or a mystical experience?<sup>41</sup> Eske Møllgaard, to give a second example, criticizes Western ideas of self in the *Zhuangzi* by drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, arguing that concepts like “sit and forget” (*zuowang* 坐忘) and “fast the mind” (*qixin* 齊心 or *xinzhai* 心齋) are really Zhuangzi’s therapeutic recommendations to cure the illness that is the ego.<sup>42</sup> As with Jochim, however, Møllgaard does not so much avoid talking about a self in *Zhuangzi* as he does talk about the *elimination* of self in *Zhuangzi*—in both cases there is still a self, even if all it does is get swept under the rug.

I take the view that it would be almost silly *not* to assume there is a self in the *Zhuangzi* because it seems unarguable to me that some sense of self is a universal feature of human existence. The terminology used to talk about that phenomenon varies widely, of course, as do the cultural, religious, metaphysical, scientific, etc. discourses that shape and express the phenomenon. Still, even if only on a basic biological level, I have yet to see any evidence arguing that human beings don’t experience themselves as self-conscious beings in the world, which is at least a fair starting point for something called the “self.” It is beyond my scope to argue in any detail for this view here. My purpose here is not to wade into debates about what the self is and whether or not early China has one—in fact, I am claiming that “self” isn’t a *thing* at all.

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<sup>41</sup> Xu 2007 and Roth 2003 respectively.

<sup>42</sup> Møllgaard 2007, 129. For other attempts to talk about or criticize self in *Zhuangzi*, see Wong 2009, Wu 1990, and Lukashovich 1987.



The Double-Reference view, despite the understandable grumblings about applying Western or modern terminology onto the *Zhuangzi*, has some linguistic support from early China itself. The early authoritative Han Dynasty 漢朝 dictionary, the *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 explains that *wu* 吾 is for self-addressing (*zi cheng* 自稱) and *wo* 我 is for self-introducing (*zi wei* 自謂).<sup>43</sup> Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815), the Qing Dynasty 清朝 philologist and authoritative commentator on the *Shuowen Jiezi*, elaborates further, describing *wu* 吾 as a kind of private-self and *wo* 我 as a kind of public-self: “When one is talking about oneself amongst others, the appropriate word for self-reference is *wo*.”<sup>44</sup> This fits with the evidence in the *Zhuangzi*, where we find constructions like *shi wo* 使我 (“make me” or “send me”) and *wei wo* 謂我 (“call me”) but never *shi wu* 使吾 or *wei wu* 謂吾.<sup>45</sup> More recently, Huang Hesheng 黃鶴昇 has demonstrated the overall importance of *wu* 吾 rather than *wo* 我 in early Chinese thought, thus reinforcing the point that *wu* 吾 is the *subject* pronoun and that the two pronouns do different things.<sup>46</sup> Ming holds the Non-Reference view because he thinks the pronouns refer to nothing; I hold the Non-Reference view because I do not think the pronouns refer at all. Let me explain.

Ming posits the following:

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<sup>43</sup> *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字, s.v.

<sup>44</sup> Duan 1981, 1112. Translation from Ming 2016, 61.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Huang 2007.

Even if there is no sound-maker but the sounds, or no speaker but the words, *whoever* appears to be *present* to do the sounding, or the talking must be posited as a center. However, this center is neither a person, nor a Cartesian ego, nor a spirit, nor a self, real or private.<sup>47</sup>

So we need a center even if there is no “sound-maker” in that center. What, then, is to be left in this center point if not “a person, nor a Cartesian ego, not a spirit, nor a self”? God? Some empty Archimedean platform? These are hard problems that Ming could avoid by not getting tangled up in issues of referentiality. In analytic thought, meaning is often referential: to experience meaning is to understand what a thing refers to. We hear an unfamiliar word, find out what it means, and that connection is the experience of meaning. This can be a profound, but gestalt shift is another way to experience meaning: perceiving a whole rather than connecting a signifier to a signified. Because he thinks that *wu* 吾 and “I” refer to nothingness, Ming is left defending this empty center idea. Wittgenstein helps here, and Ming does briefly touch on Wittgenstein, but it is unfortunately a dismissive engagement: he calls Wittgenstein’s comments on the self “pedantic” and “murky ruminations.”<sup>48</sup> Ming’s version of the Non-Reference view is that *wu* 吾 and *wo* 我 both *point* or *refer* to something but that the things they point to do not really exist. Wittgenstein’s explanation of the language game of the self is that *wu* 吾 does not refer at all—period: the word “I” does something else entirely.

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<sup>47</sup> Ming 2016, 75. My italics.

<sup>48</sup> Ming 2016, 70 and 72. For another thing, Ming equates Wittgenstein’s remarks on the self to Elizabeth Anscombe’s and Gottlieb Frege’s, which seems obviously mistaken to me (71–72). See Littlejohn 2018, which I follow for my own purposes here.

The most basic idea here for Wittgenstein is that self is something we *do*, not *have*—it’s a verb, not a noun. Wittgenstein understands self through his language games as a useful way of speaking that helps us navigate a particular way of life.<sup>49</sup> One of the things that makes humans unique is our use of the selfing game: we use “I” to express something like “*the consciousness of Ryan...*”, and so “I” is not referring to any specific entity. What makes humans distinct is not that we *have* a soul or self but that we *express* or *articulate* the phenomenon of consciousness in a language game. Consider the following remarks Wittgenstein made in a lecture:

I want to say that realizing that the word “I” does not mean the same as “my body,” for example, that it is used differently, does not mean that a new entity besides the body, the ego, has been discovered. The argument that since *I* cannot be identified with *my body*, there must be something else, gives the impression of reporting a discovery. All that has been discovered is that “I” is not used in the same way as “my body.” If I were to say (as I would not) that my body has toothache, instead of “I have toothache”, this would merely express something wrongly. It would imply that there is no such thing as *I*, and would come to replacing “I” by “my body.” This is like the mathematicians saying (rightly) that there is no such thing as number as an entity and then saying wrongly that numbers are [only] scratches on paper.<sup>50</sup>

Wittgenstein admits that the words “I” and “my body” do not cover the same ground, but that does not mean “my body” refers to the physical form while “I” refers to the mind/self/soul (i.e., Wittgenstein is no dualist). Instead, it just means that “I” and “my body” are doing different things in the selfing game. The word “here” does not refer to a place any more than “I” refers to an entity: neither word *refers* to a specific being or location but

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<sup>49</sup> Wittgenstein 1953, §421.

<sup>50</sup> Wittgenstein 1979, 60. My brackets.

instead *express* something about a present situation: “*here seems a nice place to sit*” or “*I am too hot.*”<sup>51</sup>

When I use the word “Ryan,” I am *referring* to a person named Ryan; when I use the word “I,” I am *reporting* or *expressing* a sensation or experience or belief or state of affairs. What I am *not* doing when I use the word “I” is inviting anyone to go searching for an independent self that can be pinpointed and defined. Ming misses this distinction because he still thinks “I” (*wu* 吾) *refers to something* (a something that is actually a nothing since he says the self doesn’t exist). He writes:

In the Pre-Qin philosophy of language, “Zhuang Zhou 莊周,” as an illustration, is the private name (*si ming* 私名) of a person. Private names are understood as unique labels for individual things (usually persons) such that their uses guarantee picking out the same things in all contexts... No one will contest that as a person Zhuang Zhou certainly is an entity, which is nameable and identifiable and misidentifiable [*sic*]. In comparison, the referent of “I” seems to be both elusive and parasitic on the actuality (*shi* 實) of the user of “I”: on the one hand, there is no conceivable misidentification in using “I”; on the other, the intended reference of “I” need not be the same as the person who utters “I.” In other words, there is the hint of a special semantics for “I” that is grounded on a private sense of myself rather than on the person whose self it is. We may even say that the demonstrative use of “I” presupposes the conveying of the sense of oneself rather than the referent of the person, or the socialized self. However, we might query whether the so-called “sense of oneself” has a clear meaning.<sup>52</sup>

Wittgenstein would agree that “Zhuang Zhou” is a name referring to an entity, but he would not agree that it has some “private” use.<sup>53</sup> How could it when “Zhuang Zhou” is used publicly amongst other people for the purpose of pointing at someone? Ming thinks that Zhuang Zhou would use “Zhuang Zhou” to refer to himself (“*Zhuang Zhou is hungry*”),

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<sup>51</sup> Wittgenstein 1953, §410.

<sup>52</sup> Ming 20116, 68.

<sup>53</sup> Littlejohn 2018, whose argument I follow, notes that *si ming* 私名 is probably better translated as “personal name” anyway.

but I have trouble picturing that (unless of course Zhuang Zhou were being deliberately silly or odd). Instead, whenever Zhuang Zhou wanted to say something about “the consciousness of Zhuang Zhou,” he would use the word “I” (“*I am hungry*”). Further, Ming says that “the referent of ‘I’ seems to be both elusive and parasitic upon the actuality of the user of ‘I.’” That is, the word “I” is a parasite, a thing distinct from whoever is using the word “I.” Ming thus still understands “I” to be referring to something, but look at Wittgenstein:

When I say “I am in pain,” I do not point to a person who is in pain... For the main point is: I did not say that such-and-such a person was in pain, but “I am...” Now in saying this I don’t name any person. Just as I don’t name anyone when I *groan* with pain. Though someone else sees who is in pain from the groaning.<sup>54</sup>

To conclude: “I” does not refer to an entity (the self, the soul, Ryan, etc.) but expresses or reports something. “Zhuang Zhou” (or “Ryan”) *does* refer, pointing back reflexively to the being identified by other beings as Zhuang Zhou.

Duan Yucai in his *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 commentary seems to agree with Wittgenstein: we use *wu* 吾 (“I”) to express something publicly and *wo* 我 privately. So whenever we want to express or report something about ourselves (pain, hunger, belief, etc), we use “I,” just like Wittgenstein says, and when we need to single out a particular entity amongst other entities, we use *wo* 我 (which is interchangeable here with a personal name). But Ming has a needlessly complicated explanation of Duan: “when one is aware of being in pain, his thought is ‘I (*wu*) am in pain’; whereas if that person wants to tell

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<sup>54</sup> Wittgenstein 1953, §404.

others of such a fact he would have uttered ‘I (*wo*) am in pain.’”<sup>55</sup> Ming thinks that we choose between *wu* 吾 and *wo* 我 based on whether we’re talking to ourselves or to other people, but this seems contrary to ordinary experience. If the only difference between *wu* 吾 and *wo* 我 is my audience, then that means when I am hurt, I am *telling myself that I am hurt* in saying “I hurt.” But this is not how I, at least, have ever used the phrase “*I’m hurt.*” Ming misreads Duan because he is still invested in the word “I” *referring* to something. Things get even messier because Ming subscribes to the Non-Reference view: he treats “I” as if it refers to something, but the something it refers to is *nothing* (i.e., selflessness). This has the unfortunate side effect of treating nothing like something.



So Nanguo Ziqi’s remark, “*I lost myself*” (*wu sang wo* 吾喪我), on a Wittgensteinian view, is more expressive than referential. He is not making any literal metaphysical statement requiring us to differentiate between different types of self or mind or soul. This jibes with my interpretation of the butterfly passage having no transcendent self. Nanguo is *expressing* something about himself, not *observing* something about himself (that he has lost his ontologically distinct mind).<sup>56</sup> Given this, it is important to look carefully at what’s happening to Nanguo Ziqi if we want a clearer picture of what he’s expressing.

Yancheng Ziyou observes a change in Nanguo Ziqi: “what leans on that armrest right now is not what leaned on it before.”<sup>57</sup> Yancheng colorfully describes Nanguo as

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<sup>55</sup> Ming 2016, 61.

<sup>56</sup> “The English ‘*I’m furious*’ is not an expression of self-observation” (Wittgenstein 1982, §13—my italics).

<sup>57</sup> *Zhuangzi* 2 (*Qi wu lun* 齊物論), 48: 今之隱机者，非昔之隱机者也。

having “made the body like a withered tree and the mind like dead ash.”<sup>58</sup> Ronnie Littlejohn helpfully notes that “making the body like a withered tree” (*gao mu* 槁木) and “the mind like dead ash” (*xin duo si hui* 心若死灰) are both stock expressions appearing elsewhere throughout the *Zhuangzi*.<sup>59</sup> Consider the following scene from Chapter 21 (*Tian zi fang* 田子方):

Confucius went to see Lao Dan [Laozi], who had just finished washing his hair, spreading it down across his shoulders to dry. He lay there looking creepily inert, inhuman even [熱然似非人]. Confucius waited offside a bit but eventually showed himself, saying, “Am I seeing things or did that just really happen? Just now, sir, your body was stiff as a dug-up stump of a dead tree [形體掘若槁木], as if you had let go of all things and people and stood in solitude itself [似遺物離人而立於獨也].”

Lao Dan said, “I was letting my mind meander through the beginnings of things [吾遊心於物之初]...”

Confucius said, “This wandering—may I ask about it?”

Lao Dan said, “Ah, the meaning is this: attain perfect beauty and happiness [至美至樂]. Attaining perfect beauty and wandering in perfect happiness—call that the perfected person [至人].”<sup>60</sup>

Next, a brief dialogue from Chapter 22, “Knowledge Roaming North” (*Zhi bei you* 知北遊):

Nieque [齧缺] asked Beiyi [被衣] about the *dao* [道]. Beiyi said, “Align your body [正汝形] and unify your vision [一汝視], then Heaven’s harmony will arrive [天和將至]. Gather your awareness [攝汝知] and unify your thoughts [一汝度], then spirit will dwell [神將來舍]. Your virtuosity will make you beautiful [德將為汝美], the *dao* will be your

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<sup>58</sup> *Zhuangzi* 2 (*Qi wu lun* 齊物論), 48: 形固可使如槁木，而心固可使如死灰乎。

<sup>59</sup> Littlejohn 2018, 553–555.

<sup>60</sup> *Zhuangzi* 21 (*Tian zi fang* 田子方), 771–772, 774.

home. Be like a newborn calf, seeking no explanations, oblivious [汝瞳焉如新出之犢而無求其故].” But before Beiyi had even finished talking, Nieque fell asleep. Beiyi was delighted and walked off singing:

Body like a withered bones [形若槁骸],  
mind like dead ash [心若死灰],  
his understanding is the real deal [真其實知],  
not looking for reasons and motives [不以故自].  
Dim, dim, dark, dark [媒媒晦晦].  
Free of plans, free of intent [無心而不可與謀].  
What a man [彼何人哉]<sup>61</sup>

And, finally, here is another appearance of the metaphor from Chapter 23 (*Geng sang chu* 庚桑楚), in which Laozi gives instruction to Nanrong Chu 南榮處:

Laozi said, “Just now I asked you, ‘*Can you become an infant?*’ An infant moves without realizing what it’s doing or where it’s going. Its body is like a withered tree [身若槁木], its mind like dead ash [心若死灰]. Being that way, good and bad fortune alike never come to the infant. And being free of fortune entirely, what human suffering can the infant possibly have [禍福無有，惡有人災也]<sup>62</sup>

These three passages all show that “making the body like a withered tree and the mind like dead ash” is used repeatedly in a technical sense, indicating in all three cases that someone has entered an alternate state or different way of being in the world.

We can experience the world and ourselves differently without possessing a literal object called “the self” or “the mind.” And why should self have to be a literal thing for us to talk about it? Wittgenstein’s idea is that we just ought to try to get clear about how we really use the word, not that we need to abandon it.

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<sup>61</sup> *Zhuangzi* 22 (*Zhi bei you* 知北遊), 799.

<sup>62</sup> *Zhuangzi* 23 (*Geng sang chu* 庚桑楚), 856.



The words “soul” and “mind” have been used as though they stood for a thing, a gaseous thing. “What is the soul?” is a misleading question, as are questions about the words “concrete” and “abstract,” which suggest an analogy with solid and gaseous instead of with a chair and the permission to sit on a chair... What happens with the words “God” and “soul” is what happens with the word “number...” The reason people say that a number is a scratch on the blackboard is the desire to point to something.<sup>63</sup>

It is difficult to point to a thing and say “*that is what a number is!*”, but this doesn’t mean the term “number” is useless. Numbers can be real without being literal things. In terms of the Platonic Forms, things like justice and beauty can be real, without also being literal *things* floating around somewhere. Yancheng Ziyou sees Nanguo Ziqi behaving strangely and remarks that he can’t figure out what happened to his friend. He says, further, that Nanguo is not expressing himself the way he usually does: “Can the body really be made like a withered tree, the mind like dead ashes?” This refers to a different state of mind, a different way of displaying consciousness—but it does *not mean* that there is a literal *thing*, a self or mind, that the description refers to. There is no “normal self” undergoing a change into a “withered-tree-and-dead-ashes self.” Nanguo *expresses* himself just like Laozi and Beiyi in the other *Zhuangzi* passages. The self of withered trees and dead ashes is a verb.

Nanguo Ziqi uses *wo* 我 to draw attention to the person named Nanguo Ziqi, a person distinguishable from Yancheng Ziyou, from Confucius, from Laozi, from Beiyi, or from anyone else.<sup>64</sup> Nanguo experiences something different, and when that happens, he stops expressing himself as usual and instead does so as a “withered tree and dead ash.”

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<sup>63</sup> Wittgenstein 1979, 31–32.

<sup>64</sup> Wittgenstein 1953, §405: “But at any rate when you say ‘I am in pain’, you want to draw the attention of others to a particular person.—The answer might be: ‘No I want to draw their attention to *myself*.’”

What gets lost in “*I lost myself*” is that person who moves among other persons in the world. I therefore agree with Thomas Ming’s Non-Reference view of this passage: there is no self as we might commonly think of it. But when Ming says “Non-Referential,” he means that *wu* 吾 (“I”) *refers to nothing*. When I say “Non-Referential,” I mean that *wu* 吾 does not refer at all but rather expresses an experience—in this case, the experience of losing oneself.

### §5, Pipes and Lineaments

Accepting that “I” (*wu* 吾) expresses rather than refers, we are left to try to say something about this experience that Nanguo Ziqi is expressing. After confirming Yancheng Ziyou’s observation that he looks like a withered tree and dead ashes, Nanguo goes on to try and explain such a state with a famous analogy of pipes:

Nanguo Ziqi: “Just now, I lost myself. But how could you know that? You’ve heard the pipes of man but not yet heard the pipes of earth. Or you’ve heard the pipes of earth but not yet heard the pipes of Heaven.”

Ziyou said, “May I venture to ask your meaning...?”

Ziqi said, “The Great Clod belches out its vital breath, what we call ‘wind’ [夫大塊噫氣其名為風]. With this alone, nothing happens [是唯無作], but when it blows, the countless hollows moan and roar [作則萬竅怒呿]. You aren’t so special as to have ever missed the rustling and gusting, right? The bulges and gaps of mountain forests, the nooks and crannies of hundred-span trees—they’re like noses, mouths, ears, sockets, fences, cups, ponds, and puddles. They roar and moan and bawl and suck and sigh and shout and growl. One calls out with a *yeee!*, and another responds with a *yyyy!*. Light breezes, small harmonies [冷風則小和]. Gigantic gales, great harmonies [飄風則大和]. When the cutting winds die down, all these holes become silent [眾竅為虛]. You aren’t so special as to have never seen [獨不見] all the trembling and tossing, surely?”

Ziyou said, “So the pipes of earth are the sounds of wind through hollows, and the pipes of man are the sound of breath in bamboo pipes. What about the pipes of Heaven?”

Ziqi said, “It’s the blowing through all things in their distinctness [吹萬不同] that causes their coming from themselves [使其自己]. Each thing will take its own identity, but the one who does the sounding—who is it [咸其自取怒者其誰邪]?”<sup>65</sup>

The pipes of earth are clearly the hollows, nooks, and ravines of the physical earth that sound when the wind blows through them. But the pipes of Heaven? Consider the analogy:

	<b>sounder</b>	<b>pipe material</b>	<b>sound</b>
<b>pipes of man</b> ( <i>ren lai</i> 人籟)	human	wood, metal, bone (?)	musical notes
<b>pipes of earth</b> ( <i>di lai</i> 地籟)	wind	ravines, trees, hollows	moaning, “nature sounds”
<b>pipes of Heaven</b> ( <i>tian lai</i> 天籟)	?	?	?

There is a famous teleological argument in European philosophy which holds that a design implies a designer: if we stumble upon an intricate pocket watch, we must assume that a watchmaker exists because the watch had to come from somewhere; similarly, we are justified in searching out a creator for the universe because it is improbable that such a complex thing could just spring up on its own.<sup>66</sup> Many philosophers read the pipes of Heaven as a rejection of teleology.<sup>67</sup> When Nanguo Ziqi asks, at the end of the analogy, “*who does the piping* (怒者其誰邪)?”, he gestures towards the fact that whereas panpipes require a human actor to make noise, existence itself comes into being spontaneously.

<sup>65</sup> *Zhuangzi* 2 (*Qi wu lun* 齊物論), 50–51, 55–56.

<sup>66</sup> Ratzsch and Koperski 2019 give a good overview and history. The famous example of the watchmaker comes from theologian William Paley’s *Natural Theology* (Paley 1963 [1802]).

<sup>67</sup> Zhu 2018, Ziporyn 2012 and 2003, Kim 2009, Jullien 2000. For a survey of different views on cosmology and creation in the *Zhuangzi*, see Kohn 2014.

Guo Xiang's most fundamental contribution to Zhuangzi is his idea of spontaneity (*ziran* 自然, translatable as “self-so, nature, spontaneity, of-itself-ness”). Things come into being of their own accord, in their own way, without any “unmoved mover” or “first cause” or other Godlike principle.<sup>68</sup> Guo elaborates on several related facets of naturalness: self-generation (*zi sheng* 自生), self-transformation (*zi hua* 自化), self-oblivion or self-forgetting (*zi wang* 自忘), and self-realization (*zi de* 自得).<sup>69</sup> For Guo, “all is exactly right in being exactly what it is,” and the distinct existence of each thing in the world is “absolutely self-sufficient, independent, and inviolate.”<sup>70</sup> Things in the world (*wu* 物, which includes humans) also interact in a complex array of mutual interdependence, which Guo Xiang argues in his commentary on this passage from the *Zhuangzi*:

物無非彼，物無非是。自彼則不見，自知則知之。故曰彼出於是，是亦因彼。彼是方生之說也，雖然，方生方死，方死方生；方可方不可，方不可方可；因是因非，因非因是。<sup>71</sup>

There are no things which are not ‘that’, and there are no things which are not ‘this’. From ‘that’, you cannot see it, but from knowing, you can understand it. Therefore, ‘that’ comes out of ‘this’, and ‘this’ depends on ‘that’. This is the ‘that-this’ theory of co-generation. Given all this, where there is life, there is death; where there is death, there is life; where there is acceptability, there is unacceptability; where there is unacceptability, there is acceptability; relying on affirmation is relying on negation; relying on negation is relying on affirmation.

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<sup>68</sup> Kohn 2014, chapter 9.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Wang 2012, Ziporyn 2003, and Cai and Bruya 1992.

<sup>70</sup> Ziporyn 2003, 28 and 32.

<sup>71</sup> *Zhuangzi* 2 (*Qi wu lun* 齊物論), 73.

The idea is that as anything comes into being (*sheng* 生) it does so in tandem with (*fang* 方) something else.<sup>72</sup> The use of *shi* 是 and *fei* 非 here matters a great deal because the characters mean so many different things: *shi* can mean “this, right, assert, true,” and more, while *fei* can mean “that, wrong, deny, false,” and so on. Let us go along with Guo Xiang’s notion of spontaneity.

When Nanguo Ziqi asks “*who is the one doing the sounding?*” he highlights that the world and all its distinct entities are out there doing what they do without anyone keeping an eye on them.

Ziqi said, “It’s the blowing through all things in their distinctness [吹萬不同] that causes their coming from themselves [使其自己]. Each thing will take its own identity, but the one who does the sounding—who is it [咸其自取怒者其誰邪]?”<sup>73</sup>

“Wind” does not blow through each of the ten-thousand things (i.e., existence) the same way (*butong* 不同). Here we have an echo of Guo Xiang’s reading of the butterfly passage: the butterfly and Zhuang Zhou each exist, distinct from each other. The distinctness of the earthly hollows and of the wind is what allows the pipes of earth to sound—resonance requires distinctness that is nonetheless interdependent.

And what does it mean to resound? I have argued that metaphors are ontological depth charges that reveal real structural similarities between things in the world. I take the musical dimension of Nanguo’s metaphor seriously: human panpipes literally resound, as do earthly hollows; the pipes of Heaven also resound, though perhaps not with literal

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<sup>72</sup> For A.C. Graham’s groundbreaking work on the importance of *fang* 方 as a technical term in Mohism (and on the *Zhuangzi*’s engagement with Mohist tradition), see Graham 1970 and 1978.

<sup>73</sup> *Zhuangzi* 2 (*Qi wu lun* 齊物論), 56.

sonic effect. Resonance is a form of clarity—clarity understood as ringing or resounding.<sup>74</sup> Not everything rings, and not everything rings equally clear or bright. A bell depends on balance and symmetry, on being made of the right material (plastic will not do, bronze will), and on being empty inside. Structures or forms in the world must be integrated just so if they are to resound: think of the complex Böhm key system on a clarinet, where a button *here* closes or opens a valve *there*. Forms that have integrity resonate, and when we perceive those forms (a gestalt shift), we can “hear” their resonance. Such perception is a kind of ecological sensitivity because it is an awareness of how multiple parts cohere. The experience of clarity requires a simultaneous attention to distinct parts and to the whole, which echoes the simultaneous distinctness and interdependence of things we find throughout the *Zhuangzi*: the earthly hollows and the wind, the inner emptiness and outer hardness of a pot, the soaringly independent Peng 鵬 bird and the massive whirlwinds he relies on to fly—on and on the *Zhuangzi* demonstrates the importance of ecological thinking, of seeing things in their distinctness and interrelatedness all at once. And when we experience this integration, it strikes us—this is meaning, this is coherence, which we experience as resounding clarity.

From the viewpoint I am describing, then, the metaphor of pipes makes good sense: the world is full of resonance, full of things and beings (*wu* 物) that resound in their own distinctness, by virtue of being what they are. “Things come from themselves” (*shi qi ziji* 使其自己), as Nanguo says. How can we experience them? How can we perceive

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<sup>74</sup> Klein 1966, s.v.: “clear, adj. — fr. Indo-European bas *\*klā-*, variant of *\*kal-*, ‘to shout, resound.’”

things in the world in a meaningful way? We let them pierce us, touch us, move us, sing to us—and we respond accordingly. That response, that co-response or co-resonance, is the experience of meaning. I argued in Chapter Two that ensouled discourse (*emphukhon logon*) is discourse that addresses itself to us and thereby elicits a response. In other words, language lives or means by resounding and getting its audience to correspond. The key to Nanguo’s pipes of Heaven, I think, is that *the world itself* does the same thing. Being itself moves and resounds, and if we play our cards right, we can see it, and if we see it deeply enough, we cannot help but be moved by it. Being is dancing. We dance with it. But how? The same way any good dancer dances: lose yourself in the music.

Simone Weil’s idea of decreation gets at the phenomenon Nanguo Ziqi describes in his pipes analogy.<sup>75</sup> Roughly speaking, decreation is what happens when we attend to something outside of ourselves:

Attention should consist of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within the reach of this thought, but on the lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of... Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it.<sup>76</sup>

The original French highlights the link between attention (*l’attention*) and waiting (*attente*) that comes out in the *Zhuangzi* stories above and certainly also in the skill stories I will discuss in the next chapter. Making the body like a withered tree suggests an obvious stillness, a loss of vigor and and life itself brought out in “dead ashes.” But as we saw

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<sup>75</sup> Weil nowhere treats decreation in a sustained or systematic manner. Robert Reed goes so far as to say that Weil “wanted to ‘decreate’ decreation itself, to deny it existence as a well-defined philosophical notion so as to make it all the more difficult to approach intellectually” (Reed 2013, 25).

<sup>76</sup> Weil 1966, 62.

above, those who experience this loss of self practically shine to anyone around them.

Consider the virtuoso performances of the skillful masters alongside this remark from

Weil:

Effort truly stretched towards goodness cannot reach its goal; it is after long, fruitless effort which ends in despair, when we no longer expect anything, that, from outside ourselves, the gift comes as a marvelous surprise. The effort has destroyed a part of the false sense of fullness within us. The divine emptiness, further than fullness, has come to inhabit us.<sup>77</sup>

Nanguo is as still as Woodworker Qing sitting in the forest contemplating the trees (*guan tian xing* 觀天性) or Butcher Ding seeing the striations of reality itself (*tian li* 天理).<sup>78</sup> He's so still, in fact, that his breath entangles with Heaven and seems less like breathing than like a loss of self entirely.<sup>79</sup> When the time comes to explain what just happened to Yancheng, Nanguo resorts to metaphorical language, which reminds us of Wheelwright Bian's exasperation with language's inability to convey certain knowledge. The skillful masters, we saw, exhibit no difficulty or intense striving in their virtuosic work: Butcher Ding carves the knots and joints effortlessly, Wheelwright Bian works smoothly and without interruption by measurement tools, and Woodworker Qing sits still in the forest and harmonizes with Heaven (*yi tian he tian* 以天合天).

Weil suggests a similar sort of harmony, arising specifically from a loss of self:

If only I could see a landscape as it is when I am not there. But when I am in any place I disturb the silence of heaven by the beating of my heart.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Weil 1952, 46–47.

<sup>78</sup> I merely preview these figures, all of whom will be given further treatment in Chapter Six.

<sup>79</sup> *Zhuangzi* 2 (*Qi wu lun* 齊物論), 48: 南郭子綦隱机而坐，仰天而嘘，荅焉似喪其耦。

<sup>80</sup> Weil 1952, 89.



The goal is to see the world as clearly as possible, so clearly that one does not even have to peer around the obstacle of one's own self. From Wittgenstein's selfing game, we know that "*I lost myself*" expresses an experience but does not describe a quality of some independent self. It makes sense then to ask what it must have been like for Nanguo Ziqi to lose himself. Weil would have been keen on this question too:

Perfect joy excludes even the very feeling of joy, for in the soul filled by the object no corner is left for saying "I."<sup>81</sup>

God can only be present in creation under the form of absence.<sup>82</sup>

The self is only a shadow projected by sin and error which blocks God's light and which I take for a Being.<sup>83</sup>

May I disappear in order that those things that I see may become more perfect in their beauty from the very fact that they are no longer things that I see.<sup>84</sup>

We may not have access to an Archimedean point, but it is an undeniable feature of human life that we sometimes experience the world with our self pushed to the side, de-centered, decreeted. Iris Murdoch captures this in a famous passage:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important.<sup>85</sup>

It would be silly to read Murdoch here as espousing any sort of literal self-destruction—she is, after all, still alive to report the experience. Murdoch goes from her ordinary view

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>83</sup> Weil 1956, 419.

<sup>84</sup> Weil 1952, 42.

<sup>85</sup> Murdoch 1997, 369.

of the world in which the ego is the center and lens to a more unmediated view of the world.

As we saw in Plato's talk of the beloved, this shift sometimes goes by the Ancient Greek term *ekplētō* ("strike out, overwhelm, drive away"). In the *Phaedrus*, Plato alludes to Sappho in his descriptions of the lover seeing the beloved, and Sappho's poem *No.31* has an affinity with Nanguo Ziqi:

He seems to me equal to gods that man  
whoever he is who opposite you  
sits and listens close  
    to your sweet speaking  
and lovely laughing—oh it  
puts the heart in my chest on wings  
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking  
    is left in me  
no: tongue breaks and thin  
fire is racing under skin  
and in eyes no sight and drumming  
    fills ears  
and cold sweat holds me and shaking  
grips me all, greener than grass  
I am dead—or almost  
    I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty<sup>86</sup>

Sappho observes herself as if from an outside perspective: "I am dead—or almost / I seem to me." Nanguo Ziqi loses his partner (*si sang qi ou* 似喪其耦), which is another way of saying his awareness of himself as a person in the world among others.<sup>87</sup> Sappho also lists off several physical manifestations of her experience of *ekplētō*: what we would label

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<sup>86</sup> Carson 2003, 62–63.

<sup>87</sup> "Losing me (*sangwo* 喪我)' is paired with, indeed seems to be identical with, 'losing his opposite/ counterpart (*sang qi ou* 喪其耦): 'Me' and 'the opposite/counterpart' appear to be opposites, but the losing of one is synonymous with the losing of the other, for in losing one, both are lost" (Ziporyn 2012, 165).

as the symptoms of lovesickness. And she presents the symptoms as metaphors (“*the heart in my chest on wings*”). Nanguo has his own physical “symptoms” that come out in the metaphor of “making the body resemble a withered tree and the mind like dead ashes.” We are not meant to read Sappho’s *No.31* as positing some literal double self hovering above her body; just so, Nanguo’s story requires no literal self or mind floating about—but this doesn’t make his experience any less real.



Why would Nanguo Ziqi, or anyone else for that matter, *want* to experience decreation? Weil may have had her own motives, coming out a tradition of mystical Christianity flavored with atheism, but we need not adopt those commitments to see the appeal of her idea.<sup>88</sup> Why should anyone want to see a landscape as it appears when they are not there? Because that is how the landscape looks—that is the truth of the matter. And this is not truth as a logical correspondence or verification but as a meaningful coherence (as laid out in Chapter Three). Coherence truth is not about matching up with the world in a verifiable way but about something hanging together meaningfully. Why should this model of truth be at all desirable? Why should Nanguo want to see the world without himself in the way? Because it *feels good* to see how things fit. This is not meant to beg the question: following the recent research into gestalt thinking, we know that the perception of coherent wholes is hardwired into us on an evolutionary level. Or think of

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<sup>88</sup> Iris Murdoch, greatly influenced as she was by Weil, rejects Weil’s ascetic impulses: “many readers find a repellent and self-destructive quality in her austerity...and it is hard not to believe that she in some way willed her own early death” (Murdoch 1997, 160).

Aristotle, who points out how we often learn by imitation because there is just something inherently satisfying about it.<sup>89</sup>

In one of the epigraphs at the start of this chapter, W.B. Yeats asks: “O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?” Nanguo Ziqi’s loss of self shows us that we *can’t* tell the dancer from the dance, at least not completely. The loss of self mirrors the silence and emptiness of the external world, an emptiness that allows for clarity, which is resonance, which is meaning and truth. What would a dance be without a dancer to instantiate it? And how can a person be a dancer without steps, purposeful movements, rhythms, beats? This illustrates the simultaneous distinctness and interdependence of all things (*wu* 物) in the *Qi wu lun* 齊物論. And what is a dance? Is it something we can point to? No—a dance, like a self, is something you *do*. We cannot point to a dance, only to a dancer dancing, only to a self selfing.

## §6, Conclusion

Perceiving a resonant form is like hearing a beautiful song or gazing upon a beloved. We feel good, we intuit something larger than ourselves, we connect with the external world in a way that is not focused through the ego. In the pipes of Heaven analogy, the wind blows through “all things in their distinctness (*chui wan bu tong* 吹萬不同),” which is to say that there are real differences amongst forms in the world: these are the lineaments of reality (*tian li* 天理). These things are not still—they dance, they resound, harmonizing with each other and transforming continually (*wu hua* 物化, “the

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<sup>89</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* §4, 1448b.

transformation of things” in the butterfly passage). To recognize that there is no sounder blowing into the pipes of Heaven is to recognize that this big beautiful dance is going on whether we see it or not, whether someone sets it in motion or not. Nanguo Ziqi sees the emptiness of the world and resorts to a metaphor of pipes to describe it because his own emptiness (“I lost myself”) echoes the emptiness he perceives in the world. And this is not an emptiness in the Parmenidean sense of non-being: it is an emptiness that makes resonance possible, the emptiness in the middle of a jug without which there would be no jug, the rests in a piece of music that allow for melody and rhythm.

Nanguo Ziqi has perceived the lineaments of reality (*tian li* 天理) in losing himself, and what he sees is a complex world of distinct forms. One bell sets another ringing, and Nanguo experiences the world *as the world experiences itself*: clearly, without clutter, without self. Yancheng Ziyou knows that Nanguo is experiencing something because he can see the expressive change in his friend (“the body like a withered tree and the mind like dead ashes”), but Nanguo’s *own personal proof* of seeing the lineaments is that he has become like them, he has responded. Nanguo has not found an Archimedean point, and he is not in a position to “get it right,” to give the correct answers to deep metaphysical questions. He has confronted being itself, dancing along, and has responded by becoming just a little more like it, by dancing a little bit himself. Our thinking is part of the world, so it makes sense that recognizing coherent forms in the world would spark a flash of recognition. When we experience the lineaments of reality, we are experiencing how we as one distinct thing among countless others fit into it all. Seeing how being gestures and gesturing back feels good—losing oneself, it turns out, is one way of coming home.

## CHAPTER VI *SKILLFUL SEEING*

Method for understanding images, symbols, etc. Not to try to interpret them, but to look at them till the light suddenly dawns. Generally speaking, a method for the exercise of the intelligence, which consists of looking.

Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

“It’s not that there’s Things, Out There, an ya gotta take care of ‘em unh-uh; it’s that human language equals Thought equals the Whole Sheebang... I know there’s no way I can prove with some argument that that’s not the way it is, an’ yeah, I even know that if I try, whatever argument I come up with’s gonna Always Already be set on self-destruct. But that seems to me to be a problem with arguments, not a problem with the world.”

Jan Zwicky, “Once Upon a Time in the West: Heidegger and the Poets”

此中有真意    Among these there is true meaning—  
欲辯已忘言    I want to articulate it but have already forgotten the words...

Tao Yuanming 陶淵明, *Drinking Wine No.5 飲酒其五* [excerpt]

### §1, Preamble

This chapter shows how several of the skill stories in the *Zhuangzi* illustrate the sort of perceptual (rather than analytic) knowing that I have argued for throughout the dissertation: knowing as a perception of resonance in the world.<sup>1</sup> Chapter Five’s treatment of the *Qi wu lun* 齊物論 suggested that Nanguo Ziqi displays a decreation of self necessary to see the world as it is and that such decreation is a response to the openness of the world (an openness that is an emptiness like that of musical pipes). Several of the *Zhuangzi*’s skillful masters illustrate a similar phenomenon, but with

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<sup>1</sup> The skill stories appear throughout the entire *Zhuangzi*, tales of various craftsmen or other masters who possess an almost supernatural level of virtuosic skill such as swimming, catching cicadas, butchering, etc. See Lai and Chiu 2019 for a recent collection of work focused on the skill stories.

different emphases. Of particular interest in this chapter is the way that skill stories often blur our modern distinctions like theory/practice, mind/body, thinking/feeling. By attending closely to these stories, and without trying to read Zhuangzi as a Daoist, I hope to bring out new aspects of the stories.

In particular, I think the stories of the skillful masters show a kind of realism: a world external to the self, a world full of meaningfulness waiting to be perceived. In Chapter Three, I noted a two-step practice outlined by Max Wertheimer and echoed in Plato with *elenkhos* and *dialektikē*: a practice that aims at clearing away our cognitive clutter (*doxa* and ego) and allowing us to intuitively grasp integrated wholes. This chapter looks at some of the habits in a few skillful masters that involve what I have called a love of clarity, an *erōs* to be struck by resonance. The skill stories of the *Zhuangzi* certainly do not frame it in terms of *erōs*, but often enough, they do not “frame it” at all. That is, the skillful masters of the *Zhuangzi* really only *try* to explain themselves when they’ve been interrupted or bothered or intruded upon by some outside observer. These stories are therefore of special interest to my project because they depict what happens when we try to subject gestalt thinking to analytic and linguistic explanation. Poetic philosophy takes these non-analytic ways of knowing as serious sources of meaning and truth, and so the skill stories are valuable case studies—made all the more valuable because they come from classical China, thus showing poetic philosophy’s applicability to something beyond just Plato.

The affinities of the skill stories to gestalt theory will become apparent as I turn to each individual story, but some general remarks may be helpful at the outset. A list of some key ideas raised by the skill masters runs as follows.

1. The importance of being attuned to or aligned with the natural world.
2. The fine line between engagement and detachment.
3. The non-analyzable, non-quantifiable nature of skill.
4. The necessity of breaking free from norms and expectations that otherwise confine behavior or thought.
5. A diminished sense of self or ego as a prerequisite for skillful virtuosity.
6. The need to “show” rather than “tell.”
7. A reliance on metaphor or analogical thinking.
8. Perception (of various sorts) as fundamental to thinking and being in the world.

From my previous chapters, it should be clear how these features of the skill stories all resonate with gestalt theory. At the very least, the terminology and framework of gestalt theory can help us think clearly about these skill stories. A similar disclaimer to the one I made for Plato in Chapter Three: my claim is not that the *Zhuangzi*'s authors were proto-gestalt theorists, but if both Plato's Forms and Zhuangzi's skill stories can be meaningfully illuminated by gestalt theory, then this suggests a comparative similarity between two thinkers who at first pass are rather dissimilar. Specifically, it shows us that Plato and Zhuangzi both recognize objective meaning in the real, natural world that we encounter as resonant forms (“*Gestalt*” in German). In the case of Plato, this lets us preserve



“Platonic realism” (the belief in real, objective truth) without all the baggage of the metaphysical Forms. The comparative point here is that if we understand realism not as a literal metaphysical thing but as the recognition of objective meaning in the world, then Zhuangzi is a realist in the same way as Plato.

For the sake of space, I will focus on three skill stories, each of which emphasizes slightly different aspects of what I’m talking about here. The story of Butcher Ding 庖丁 is in many ways the paradigmatic skill story of the *Zhuangzi*. It sets the stage and lays out many of the dominant motifs that show up in other skill stories, in particular: the disruption of many philosophical dichotomies like mind-body dualism. Wheelwright Bian 輪扁 highlights in particular how gestalt thought resists analytic thought (language, logical analysis, etc.). Woodworker Qing 梓慶 reveals the importance of harmonizing oneself with the larger world, which has implications for poetic philosophy’s focus on finding resonant clarity in the world outside the self (what Murdoch calls “un-selfing”). We will see that the skillful masters defy many of our modern separations: they are grounded in their bodies but still clearly using the mind, the intuit and feel without abandoning reason, and so on. In many ways, they exemplify Jan Zwicky’s point:

...the idea that philosophy should aim to secure thinking from error has come to seem more important than the idea that it should cultivate our ability to perceive the truth. Many professionals now believe the two aims are identical.<sup>2</sup>

Poetic philosophy begins from a recognition of humans as imperfect and mortal, creatures with many dimensions beyond the purely rational (e.g., emotional, intuitive,

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<sup>2</sup> Zwicky 2019, 94–95.

physical, ecological, and so on). Philosophy as thinking in love with clarity is a craving for the experience of meaning and truth in the world, even when it does not come in the form of programmable “error avoidance.”

#### §4, Butcher Ding 庖丁

Butcher Ding [庖丁] was carving up an ox for Lord Wen Hui [文惠君]. Wherever his hand smacked it, wherever his shoulder leaned into it, wherever his foot braced it, wherever his knee pressed it, the thwacking tones of flesh falling from bone would echo, the knife would whiz through with its resonant *thwing*, each stroke ringing out the perfect note, attuned [中] to the *Dance of the Mulberry Grove* or the *Jingshou Chorus* of the ancients.

The lord said, “Ah! It is wonderful that skill can reach such heights!”

Butcher Ding put down his knife and said, “With respect, what I love is the Way [臣之所好者道也], something that goes beyond mere *skill*. When I first started cutting up oxen, all I looked at for three years was oxen, and yet I was still unable to see all there was to see in an ox. But now I encounter [遇] it with the spirit [神] instead of scrutinizing it with the eye [不以目視]. I can stop with my senses [官知止] and let the spirit run its course [神欲行]. I conform [依] to Heaven’s lineaments [天理] and strike the larger gaps, following along with the broader hollows. I go by how things already are, playing them as they lay. So my knife has never had to cut through the knotted nodes where the warp [經] hits the weave [嘗], much less the gnarled joints of bone.

[He continued], “A good butcher changes his knife once a year: he slices. An ordinary butcher changes his knife once a month: he hacks. I have been using the same blade for *nineteen years*, cutting up thousands of oxen, but it’s still as sharp as the day it came off the whetstone. See, the joints [節] have spaces [間] within them, and the edge of the blade has no thickness at all [刀刃者無厚]. When something with no thickness enters an empty space, it’s vast and open [恢恢]—more than enough room for the play [遊] of the blade. This is why my knife is still sharp after nineteen years.

[He continued], “Now sure, when I come to a complicated tangle, I see its difficulty and restrain myself. My vision ceases, my movement slows, the knife moves subtly—all at once the whole thing comes apart, like clumps of dirt crumbling to the ground. I withdraw the knife and stand there gazing at my work all around me, hesitant to move [躊躇]. Then I wipe and sheathe the blade.”

Lord Wen Hui said, “Excellent! Hearing this butcher’s words I have learned how to nourish life [養生].”<sup>3</sup>

Butcher Ding does not really seem to have anything like a theory. His explanation for Lord Wen Hui 文惠君 is less an explanation of principles or axioms than a description of how Butcher Ding does what he does. This is the point Eno seizes upon: Zhuangzi, through Butcher Ding, approves of knowing when it’s a “knowing how” instead of a “knowing that” to use Gilbert Ryle’s famous distinction. But Butcher Ding himself doesn’t seem to make use of any such difference.

When asked to explain his virtuoso, musical butchering, Ding notes that it’s not simply a matter of skill: “my Way goes beyond mere skill [進乎技矣].” The skill or craft itself is not the point. As Carine Defoort rightly notes, practitioners who approach skills with such instrumental goals are “trying too hard and want too much” because the skill stories “do not seem to convey techniques any more than a moral code or philosophical system.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, there is no theory here. Butcher Ding doesn’t present a *theory* so much as a *story* about how he came to butcher this well (“When I first started cutting up oxen...”). In fact, Ding’s description of his art would be unhelpful for anyone trying to mimic him. This holds across other skill stories and the *Zhuangzi* itself, as Romain Graziani points out:

Aside from a few ideas and aphorisms...in the *Zhuangzi* there are no positive instructions based on a repository of texts or a set of codified norms and patterns of conduct. Relationships between masters and disciples are characterised by a...tendency whether to

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<sup>3</sup> *Zhuangzi* 3 (*Yang sheng zhu* 養生主), 128–136. Although I prefer to give the original Chinese along with any translations, the skill stories are generally just too lengthy.

<sup>4</sup> Defoort 2012, 475.

ignore or to disparage education centered on the rote learning of texts, the memorization of moral precedents, and the acquisition of ritual manners...<sup>5</sup>

All the transmissions of analytic thought—recipes, formulae, theories, algorithms, procedures—fail to capture Butcher Ding’s *dao* 道. Graziani, however, still aligns with modern professional philosophy and its dichotomies:

We can see in these episodes how authentic mastery shifts from a textual knowledge to various forms of know-how, from theoretical rules to practical skills, from ancient writings to a “live performance.” We have here the intimation of an idea that was at the time certainly hard to admit: that mastery and knowledge of the Way can be acquired without a master delivering an explicit discourse on the Way.<sup>6</sup>

I do not deny that practice and theory are distinct, but they are not significantly different experiences for us in our everyday lives. We act in light of a theory, and we theorize in light of a practice. Theory is not inactive pondering. Theory is an attempt to see clearly, an attempt to make sense of the chaotic jumble of daily experience. We suffer without any apparent reason and so theorize a world or moral view to explain our suffering. Iris Murdoch compares theory (synonymous for her with “metaphysics”) to the fire and reality to the sun. Theory is a heuristic, an image we construct to help us see and understand the world. Clinging to a theory at the expense of real life experience is what gets us into a position where we end up taking Plato’s Theory of Forms literally. Theory should be illuminating, not confining. Theory can structure the raw, chaotic data of experience into something patterned, something beautiful— “a huge hall of reflection full of light and

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<sup>5</sup> Graziani 2019, 62.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 64.

space and fresh air, in which ideas and intuitions can be unsystematically nurtured,” as Murdoch says.<sup>7</sup>

One character in the text of Butcher Ding that does a lot of work as far as blurring dichotomies of modern professional philosophy is *zhi* 知 (“know”). Ding explains to Lord Wen Hui that he stops his senses and lets his spirit move freely (官知止而神欲行), but it is difficult to say what exactly this means or how figuratively we should read it. *Guan zhi zhi* 官知止 literally means something like “senses/organs (*guan*) know/recognize/aware (*zhi*) stop (*zhi*).” *Zhi* 知 is often glossed as “knowledge” in English, but *zhi* 知 is rarely used in Classical Chinese to mean knowledge in the modern philosophical sense of “justified true belief.” *Zhi* 知 is translated from the *Zhuangzi*’s Inner Chapters into English as “knowing” about 60% of the time and as “understanding” about 30% of the time.<sup>8</sup> *Zhi* 知 touches on several English words including “understanding,” “knowing,” “wisdom,” “discernment,” “comprehension,” “consciousness,” “know-how” and the wherewithal to act that comes from all these things.<sup>9</sup> In Classical Chinese generally and the *Zhuangzi* especially, *zhi* 知 is usually a verb rather than a noun. The English “wisdom” or “knowledge” is probably better found in the homophone *zhi* 智, which appears in so-called Daoist texts from the Warring States but never in the *Zhuangzi* itself. In modern professional philosophy, we tend to think of knowledge as justified true belief, as

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<sup>7</sup> Murdoch 1997, 422.

<sup>8</sup> Ma and van Brakel 2019, 235n38.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 122.

something verifiable. This of course is one sort of knowing, but gestalt theory shows us that it is not the only sort. And yet, because of our tendency to think of knowledge analytically, translations of the *Zhuangzi* end up presupposing certain ideas. Recall the butterfly dream passage, for example:

不知周之夢為胡蝶與<sup>10</sup>

He did not *know* if he was Zhuang Zhou dreaming of being a butterfly...

He was *unaware* of Zhuang Zhou's dreaming of being a butterfly...

If *zhi* 知 is “to know,” then this passage fits neatly into modern Western debates about skepticism—it is practically Cartesian: “*how do I know that I am what I think I am?*” But if *zhi* 知 is “to be aware” or “to see,” then the passage is less about epistemological skepticism than about awareness and attention.

Poetic philosophy, as I argued in Chapters Three and Four, holds that all knowing is a form of perceiving.

**Weil:** Method for understanding images, symbols, etc. Not to try to interpret them, but to look at them till the light suddenly dawns. Generally speaking, a method for the exercise of the intelligence, which consists of looking. Application of this rule for the discrimination between the real and the illusory.<sup>11</sup>

**Weil:** Not to try to interpret...but to look...till the light suddenly dawns.<sup>12</sup>

**Wittgenstein:** When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Zhuangzi* 2 (*Qi wu lun* 齊物論), 123.

<sup>11</sup> Weil 1952, 120.

<sup>12</sup> Weil 1952, 120.

<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein 1977, §144.

**Wittgenstein:** To repeat: don't think, but look!<sup>14</sup>

**Murdoch:** The ideal of knowledge is to see face to face, not (*eikasia*) in a glass darkly... The best we can hope for is the flash of ultra-verbal understanding which may occur in live philosophical discussion when careful informed trained speech has set the scene.<sup>15</sup>

My use of “knowing” is broader than the typical philosophical use because I include non-analytic forms of knowing like bodily or intuitive or emotional knowing, which are not amenable to the verification processes of analytic thought. Gestalt theory shows us that we very often come to know something by seeing it, by becoming aware of how things cohere or hang together. Let us now apply this to Butcher Ding.

“I stop my senses and let the spirit run its course” (官知止而神欲行). We should not read this literally. To begin with, Butcher Ding clearly does not stop using his physical senses: he employs his sense of touch by grasping the knife and leaning against the carcass, his sense of proprioception by not cutting his own body, his sense of balance by not falling, his sense of hearing by noticing how the ox's body falls to the ground, even his sense of sight by seeing when he comes to a knotted joint. So it does not make sense to read the stopping of the senses (官知止) and the loosing of the spirit (神欲行) as some sort of dualistic body-mind, physical-immaterial, practice-theory, form-content dichotomy.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein 1953, §66.

<sup>15</sup> Murdoch 1997, 413.

<sup>16</sup> I am not making any larger claims about mind-body duality in early China. I am in general agreement with recent work on this issue by Lisa Raphals that argues both early China and ancient Greece contain a range of texts and genres, some of which tend towards what we might call a strict mind-body dualism and some towards what we might call holism. The pertinent factors seem to me time period, genre, rhetorical aims, and so on rather than “Chinese culture” or “Greek culture” generally.

Butcher Ding never stops using his senses, he never leaves his body. In fact, what catches Lord Wen Hui's attention in the first place is the intense physicality of Ding's butchery: his hands, legs, shoulders, and feet all move and make contact with the ox carcass. Ding moves in such reliable patterns that the sounds of his carving have a musical shape to them, attuned or harmonized with (*zhong* 中) apparently well-known songs. From an outside observer's perspective, then, Butcher Ding works with the predictable regularity of a musical performance.

The catch is that none of these physically observable qualities of Ding's carving are sufficient to satisfy Lord Wen Hui's curiosity. For Butcher Ding to explain himself simply by noting what his body does and when would be like an ace pitcher trying to explain in purely empirical-sensory terms how to throw a baseball: "*So, I see the ball, and my sense of balance shifts at so and so angles while my hearing is tuned into such and such.*" Or imagine trying to break down the actions of a masterful sculptor using only your senses: "*Well, I smell the clay she's using, and I can hear how she breaths a little heavier when she pushes with both hands.*"

Phrased differently, Butcher Ding's physical actions only give what Aristotle calls the effective cause. We can see *how* his body moves and *when* and *where*, but this does not give us a true understanding of what he's doing. You could in theory exhaustively catalog all the physical actions of an entire orchestra: the frequency of the cello strings, the velocity of violins, the decibels of the woodwinds—but looking at all that information would not give you a full understanding of Beethoven's Violin Concerto in D Major. For the fuller understanding, you simply have to hear it, feel it, sway to it. The paradox is that



this does involve the physical senses even as the physical senses alone cannot provide evidence for what makes the Violin Concerto in D Major such a brilliant piece of music. We saw this same tension in Plato's *Phaedrus*: as humans, we stretch beyond our physical limits without ever leaving them behind.

I propose we interpret *shen you xing* 神欲行 in this light. *Shen* 神 in my reading is a character that accounts for this “something extra” that is rooted in but not confined to the empirical senses. *Shen* 神 brings with it a host of philosophically thorny issues like the mind-body problem or definitions of “self” and “soul.” Given that these issues rely on dichotomies like form-content, mind-body, physical-immaterial, natural-supernatural, poetic philosophy largely avoids them.<sup>17</sup> We need not read *shen* 神 as a supernatural substance or as an entity or force distinct from the physical body like Western notions of “spirit” or “soul.” The Butcher Ding passage makes more sense if we understand *shen* 神 phenomenologically, as a kind of “godlike skill” in the sense of something fluid and effortless but not literally daemonic or divine. Butcher Ding explains that it took him three years to reach a point where he moves according to his *shen* 神 and not just his empirical observations. Learning a foreign language comes to mind: the first year is stumbling and clumsy, we spend too much time trying to land the right accents and tones and grammar that we aren't “in it” when we speak. The second or third years often involve immersion as we get a better ear for things and start to develop linguistic reflexes.

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<sup>17</sup> I actually think my notion of poetic philosophy gets around many historically intractable problems in European philosophy, but this is a Moby Dick of a topic that is beyond my current scope and powers. As far as the present chapter is concerned, the best example is skepticism, which arises from a fact-value distinction rejected by poetic philosophy.

The final stage of fluency, compared to the earlier ones, seems godlike or divine or virtuosic—in a word, *shen* 神. Butcher Ding is saying something like, “*my awareness of things isn’t so much empirical sense data as it is something else...call it ‘spiritual’ if you like.*” *Shen* 神 is hard to translate here precisely because Butcher Ding is using it as a placeholder for a kind of knowing that defies explanation. He comes to an awareness of the ox before him, but it is an awareness not quite limited to empirical verification.

Butcher Ding’s *shen*-like carving is not supernatural even if it is unable to be empirically verified. He clearly knows what he is doing even if that knowledge is not “justified true belief” in the sense of analyzable or provable data. Applying a theory-practice dichotomy to the story is not sufficient because Butcher Ding just doesn’t have a theory in the sense of an articulable and transmittable method. He *does* have a theory in the sense of a clear understanding of the world before him, a way of making sense of his context (i.e., the ox carcass). But this notion of theory requires us to take seriously embodied, intuitive, non-analytic knowledge. Butcher Ding’s knowledge (in this more expansive gestalt sense) relies upon his physical senses even as it is not fully explicable with those same senses (this is the *shen* 神 dimension of things). In Butcher Ding, then, we have a distortion of several mainstays of modern professional philosophy.

<b>Body</b>	<b>Mind / Spirit / Soul</b>
<i>Butcher Ding relies on his senses for an incredibly physical act, but he performs in a way that goes beyond any mere sense description.</i>	
<b>Form</b>	<b>Content</b>
<i>The Butcher Ding story leaves readers with no actual instructions, which reflects the lack of any analytic theory within the story.</i>	

Practice	Theory
<i>Butcher Ding has a theory only in the poetic sense of a way of making sense of the world—not a theory in the analytic sense of a systematic explanation for his practice.</i>	

## §5, Wheelwright Bian 輪扁

Duke Huan [桓公] read a book high in his hall while Wheelwright Bian [輪扁] cut a wheel in the same hall below. The wheelwright laid down his hammer and chisel, ascended the hall, and asked Duke Huan: “May I dare to ask after what words your grace reads?”

“The words of the sages [聖人],” the duke said.

“The sages live [聖人在乎]?” asked the wheelwright.

“They’ve already died [已死矣],” said the duke.

“In that case [然則], why does your grace read the dregs the ancients left behind [古人之糟魄已夫]?”

“How can a wheelwright comment [議] on *my reading* [寡人讀書]? If you can explain yourself, all well and good [有說則可]. But if not, you die.”

Wheelwright Bian said, “I can only speak from the perspective of my own humble craft [臣也以臣之事觀之]. Consider cutting a wheel: if I hammer too gently, the chisel slips and doesn’t dig in. If I hammer too forcefully, the chisel digs in but won’t move. Not too gentle, not too forceful [不徐不疾]. You have to just *get it* in your hand or just *feel it* in your mind [得之於手而應於心]. I can’t really put it into words [口不能言], but there’s a knack to it. I can’t explain it [喻] to my son, and my son can’t receive it from me, which is why I’ve gone along these seventy years still cutting wheels in my old age. The ancients and what they couldn’t transmit [不可傳] have died, so what you’re reading is really just the dregs.”<sup>18</sup>

This skill story, more explicitly than any other, shows the ineffability of gestalt thought, how the experience of meaning and coherent truths resist expression in

<sup>18</sup> *Zhuangzi* 13 (*Tian dao* 天道), 531–533.

language, the crown jewel of analytic thought. As such, this skill story is especially valuable for talking about poetic philosophy in the *Zhuangzi*. As I said in Chapter One, poetic language is language that tries to express itself with an awareness that language is not fully up to the task. A skill story that deals explicitly with the failure of language and the resistance of certain types of knowing to analysis is therefore ripe for a poetic reading.

The first thing to note about Wheelwright Bian is that he is an unusual wheelwright in the context of the Warring States era. It would have been standard practice in that time for a wheelwright to use a compass and a square to measure and make wheels, but Wheelwright Bian notably works with only a hammer and chisel.<sup>19</sup> The *Zhuangzi* also contains several passages critical of using compass and square:

且夫待鉤繩規矩而正者，是削其性者也；待繩約膠漆而固者，是侵其德者也；屈折禮樂，响俞仁義，以慰天下之心者，此失其常然也。<sup>20</sup>

Relying on the carpenter's curve and plumb line or compass and square to level something means hacking up the thing's natural shape. Relying on cords and knots or glue and lacquer to solidify something means violating the thing's own power. Folks who bow and scrape for rituals and music, who approve and nurture virtues like humaneness and righteousness—they just wreck their own consistent naturalness.

毀絕鉤繩而棄規矩，攬工倕之指，而天下始人有其巧矣。<sup>21</sup>

The carpenter's curve and plumb line—smash them! The compass and square—trash them! The fingers of Artisan Chui—shackle them! *Then*, finally, the people of the world will have some real skill.

工倕旋而蓋規矩，指與物化而不以心稽。◦◦◦◦◦◦<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Raphals 2019 for a good exploration of this, including references to contemporaneous texts that *do* mention wheelwrights using compasses.

<sup>20</sup> *Zhuangzi* 8 (*Pian mu* 駢拇), 350.

<sup>21</sup> *Zhuangzi* 10 (*Qu qie* 肱篋), 385.

<sup>22</sup> *Zhuangzi* 19 (*Da sheng* 達生), 718.

Artisan Chui could draw freehand as if using a compass and square. His fingers just changed along with things, and he didn't use his mind to plan or calculate.

The first passage takes place in the context of a discussion of whether or not there exist unchanging things in the world (*tianxia you chang ran* 天下有常然). The cited lines suggest that constancy *does* exist but that we do not achieve it with the tools of the carpenter. Rather, what constancy there is exists quite apart from human efforts to measure and force consistency. The second passage more directly rejects the tools of measurement in favor of a kind of elegance or craft (*qiao* 巧). The third passage extols Artisan Chui precisely because he does not need the typical artisan's tools. In fact, Chui's virtuoso crafting is virtuosic precisely because he abandons the very mindset of calculation entirely (*bu yi xin ji* 不以心稽)—it's not just tools he gives up but measurement itself.

Here I differ from Raphals, who says that “the deliberative use of the heart-mind [*xin* 心] is analogised to precision instruments.”<sup>23</sup> I do not think the passage compares the mind generally to measurement tools. I read an implied possessive *zhi* 之 in the line (不以心[之]稽), which was probably left out to maintain parallelism with the first part of the line (指與物化)—and this first phrase could have a possessive *zhi* 之 in the same place: 物[之]化. Raphals' own translation says, “the transformation *of* things” for the first phrase but “did not use his heart-mind to calculate” for the second phrase. The parallelism of Classical Chinese is such that we can safely assume the noun-possessive-noun structure

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<sup>23</sup> Raphals 2019, 135. I make grateful use of Raphals' intellectual housekeeping work on this skill story.

from the first part of the line applies to the second: “transformation *of* things...calculation *of* the mind.” So it’s not that Chui doesn’t rely on his mind; it’s that Chui doesn’t rely on his mind’s calculative faculties.<sup>24</sup> This matters because if we read this as a straightforward analogy of the human mind to tools, we fall back into several unhelpful dichotomies: body versus mind, thought versus intuition, and so on. These are the very dichotomies that many of the skill stories disrupt.

So, Wheelwright Bian forsakes the measuring instruments common to his trade. This goes a long way towards explaining why Wheelwright Bian cannot pass on his knowledge to his son. Were it simply a matter of technical expertise, he could teach the son to use the tools and the proper formulae. Raphals points out that the term *guiju* 規矩 (“compass and square”) in the Artisan Chui passage lost its literal meaning and came to be a common Warring States metaphor for moral regulation. Wheelwright Bian cannot transfer his moral expertise to his son because moral expertise is not reducible to an instruction manual.<sup>25</sup> This skill story leaves implied an analogy between Wheelwright Bian’s disdain for Duke Huan’s written texts and the absent measuring instruments. Just as measuring instruments and calculative thinking (*xin ji* 心稽) cannot fully contain the

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<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that Raphals is not alone in her reading of the line. Perhaps the two commonest translations, those of Burton Watson and A.C. Graham, both gloss the line such that the opposition is between the body and the mind. Victor Mair and Brook Ziporyn, however, both translate it in such a way as to leave the analytic faculties distinct from the mind overall: “...his fingers evolved with things and he did not calculate with his mind” and “...his fingers transformed along with the thing he was making, his mind never lingering to check or verify” (respectively, Mair 1994, 184 and Ziporyn 2009, 82).

<sup>25</sup> Zagzebski 2017 is the standard account in contemporary analytic philosophy of moral exemplarity and its non-transferability. See also Olberding 2012, which explicitly applies Zagzebski’s work to the *Analects*.

virtuosity of Bian's craft, neither can the recorded words of the ancients contain and transmit their wisdom (*bu ke zhuan* 不可傳).

Importantly, Wheelwright Bian is not a skeptic insofar as he does make a positive attempt to explain himself: "I can only speak from the perspective of my own humble craft" (*chen ye yi chen zhi shi guan zhi* 臣也以臣之事觀之).<sup>26</sup> His knowledge may be *limited* to his particular perspective, but that is not to *deny* the knowledge outright. Poetic philosophy begins from an acknowledgement of our imperfect nature as embodied human beings, and the *Zhuangzi* seems to embrace this fact more openly than does Plato.<sup>27</sup> The whole thrust of this skill story is that one can know without being able to measure or linguistically articulate and pass on that knowledge. Knowing must therefore be understood in a broader sense than the limited analytic and linguistic modes. This leads to an especially notable feature of the Wheelwright Bian story: the explicit mention of the inadequacy of language—a topic we already saw come up in the *Phaedrus* (see Chapter Two).

In Chapter One I used Kay Ryan's poem *Post-Construction* to discuss "ghost ribs," the meaning blocked to us by language towards which language nevertheless tries to gesture.<sup>28</sup> Language alive to its own limits is what I call poetic language. A written text of

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<sup>26</sup> He is also not a *non-skeptic* in the sense that modern debates about skepticism shouldn't be projected onto the *Zhuangzi*.

<sup>27</sup> Obviously, I think that Plato acknowledges this imperfection as well, but I needed a whole chapter on the *Phaedrus* to try and argue that claim. Here in the *Zhuangzi*, it seems much less disputable.

<sup>28</sup> For convenience, the poem runs as follows: "Who knows better / than the builder / not to trust / a structure, where / it's off kilter, / how too few / rafters bear / too much roof? / And still it / may stand, proof / against craft, / strong as though / ghost ribs / had been added / after one left."

the *Zhuangzi*'s complexity and beauty characterizing written words as “dregs the ancients left behind” (*gu ren zhi zao po yi* 古人之糟魄已) is a striking tension. We cannot hastily set up any opposition between a sort of mystical, wordless Daoism and a text-based, systematic Confucianism because the canonical system of Confucian classics was not settled, codified, and popularized until several centuries after the *Zhuangzi* was likely compiled.<sup>29</sup> How are we to make sense of this criticism of words in a written text? In other words, what ghost ribs prop up this text and save it from sloppy meaninglessness? I shall return to the problem of “ghost ribs” in my concluding chapter. For now, I just want to emphasize the applicability for gestalt thought and thus poetic philosophy in this story.

Wheelwright Bian's criticism of Duke Huan's books most closely matches what I called Socrates' fourth objection to writing in the *Phaedrus*: writing as the mere image of speech, a dead and fossilized discourse as opposed to the living and moving spoken word. On this view, any wisdom gained from writing is only appearance, a “dream-image” and not “waking reality.”<sup>30</sup> What remains in the written word is neither the living grape on the vine nor the rich wine but the dried-up dregs, a fossil of whatever original wisdom the ancients may have had.<sup>31</sup> But Wheelwright Bian goes even further than Socrates by criticizing language in general and not just written words. Wheelwright Bian fails to

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<sup>29</sup> For a good general account of this process with special attention the authority granted writing, see Lewis 1999.

<sup>30</sup> *Phr.* 275d, 277d–278a. Reproduced verbatim from my Chapter Two.

<sup>31</sup> Raphals 2019 offers an alternative reading: “At issue here is whether Bian is making a claim about timeliness and innovation, the knowledge of the sages of antiquity addressed the needs of a different time, and their wisdom, while valuable for their own time, is not valid for this one” (139). While plausible, I think Bian's criticism is more clearly against language *per se* than about historical context (Raphals does not deny this).



explain to his son *even in speech* how to be a wheelwright: literally, “mouth cannot speak” (*kou bu neng yan* 口不能言). The problem is not written versus spoken—the problem is language itself.

Recent research into gestalt theory by researchers like Jonathan Schooler, Iain McGilchrist, and Gunnar Johansson has empirically supported this phenomenon: language, as an analytic faculty of the brain, actively inhibits gestalt perception.<sup>32</sup> Wheelwright Bian’s skillfulness relies on his embodied experience: “not too skillful, not too forceful” (*bu xu bu ji* 不徐不疾). But he immediately goes on to disrupt any easy dichotomy of “body versus mind” when he says, “you have to just *get it* in your hands and just *feel it* in your mind (*de zhi yu shou er ying yu xin* 得之於手而應於心). Bian does not privilege any one way of perception over the other. It’s also worth noting that the verb translated as “feel” here is *ying* 應, which means, variously, “react, respond, deserve, ought, answer.” The idea seems to be that Wheelwright Bian *responds* with his *xin* 心 (“heart, mind, consciousness, cognition center”). This is very different from using the *xin* 心 as a purely calculative instrument that imposes external measures onto reality like a carpenter’s tools. Gestalt thought is about the perception of meaningful forms, the awareness of coherence in the external world. Wheelwright Bian’s own self-description fits this.

Raphals’ insightful recent paper on Wheelwright Bian identifies two major themes in the story that shall carry us over into the next section: “one is a claim about language,

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<sup>32</sup> See Chapter One, §5.

the other a claim about the nature and value of distinctions and discriminations.”<sup>33</sup> The first theme is one that most explicitly arises in the *Qi wu lun* 齊物論 chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, the idea that knowledge of *dao* 道 is somehow obscured by language. The difficulty of grasping *dao* 道 in language is a persistent theme throughout the *Zhuangzi*’s Inner Chapters, and although Wheelwright Bian does not himself mention *dao* 道, it is not hard to imagine the term showing up in this story similarly to how it does in the Butcher Ding story. The second theme is the rejection of conventional discriminations and judgments, which also features prominently in the *Qi wu lun* 齊物論. Raphals notes that in the *Zhuangzi*’s Outer Chapters, this rejection “takes an additional and very specific form in the rejection of ‘compass and square’.”<sup>34</sup> Imposition of anthropocentric measurements onto the world, over-reliance on mechanistic tools, demand for linguistic articulation—this lack of respect for gestalt thought leaves us with only the dregs of human experience. This is also why poetic philosophy rejects a kind of hyper-rationalist skepticism: the skeptic’s constant demand for rational proof leaves us with only epistemic dregs, stripped of meaningfulness.

## §6, Woodworker Qing 梓慶

Woodworker Qing [梓慶] carved wood for a bell stand [鑿], and when completed, everyone who saw this bell stand marveled because it seemed an almost daemonic artifact

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<sup>33</sup> Raphals 2019, 139.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

[猶鬼神]. The Marquis of Lu [魯侯] saw it and asked the woodcarver, “You...with what art did you make this [何術以為焉]?”

The woodworker replied, “I am a mere craftsman—what art could *I* have [何術之有]? But...well, there is this one thing... When I’m about to carve a bell stand, I take care not to waste my energy [耗氣], and I *always* fast to still my mind [齊以靜心]. After three days of fasting, I no longer care about praise or rewards or titles or salary. After *five* days of fasting, I don’t worry about honor or disgrace or even skill or clumsiness. And after *seven* days of fasting, I’m so still that I forget [忘] I have four limbs and a body [四枝形體]. By then, there’s no nobles, no court [無公朝]. My skill is focused and outside distractions all slip away [其巧專而外骨消]. After all that, I enter the mountain woods and contemplate nature [觀天性]. If I encounter a tree with just the right form, and if I can see in it a bell stand, then I set my hands to work. Otherwise, I let it go. That way I’m just matching Heaven with Heaven [則以天合天]. And *that’s* probably why folks think this here artifact was made by spirits [器之所以疑神者].”<sup>35</sup>

The story of Woodworker Qing highlights the importance of perception, harmony, and the natural world in poetic philosophy. As was the case with *shen* 神 in the Butcher Ding story, this one requires a bit of mucking about in a philosophically and culturally loaded term: *tian* 天. There is a strong strand of Zhuangzi scholarship focused on the mystical dimensions of the text, especially on the influences actual mystical and shamanic practices may have had on it.<sup>36</sup> Woodworker Qing’s tale is amenable to these readings for several reasons, foremost among them his trancelike state and his comments on “matching” or “joining Heaven with Heaven” (*yi tian he tian* 以天合天). While I think mysticism and gestalt theory have a strong affinity, and while I am not allergic to mystical

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<sup>35</sup> *Zhuangzi* 19 (*Da sheng* 達生), 714–715.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Roth 1993, 1995, 1999, and 2003; Kohn 1999; and Alt 2000.

interpretations of the *Zhuangzi* in the way analytic philosophers seem to be, I nevertheless will turn my attention elsewhere in this section.<sup>37</sup>

A central plank in my interpretation of this skill story is reading *tian* 天 as a non-supernatural term. *Tian* 天 translates to English most plainly as “sky,” but in philosophical contexts “Heaven” is usually more appropriate, not in any theological sense but rather more like the Greek idea of *phusis* φύσις—“nature” in way we moderns might say “Mother Nature” to refer to an authoritative realm of coming to be and passing away without any literal anthropomorphism. I take Plato’s Forms not as literal transcendent objects but as wide-ranging metaphors for the existence of objective meaning in the world. My reading of *tian* 天 is similar in the sense that we need not posit any realm beyond the natural world around us, nor need we invoke any supernatural or spiritual forces such as might play a role in shamanistic or mystical interpretations. This will become clearer as my interpretation goes on.

Woodworker Qing appears in chapter nineteen of the *Zhuangzi* titled *Da sheng* 達生, translated by Burton Watson as “Mastering Life” and by Brook Ziporyn as “Fathoming Life.” Like several other chapters in the *Zhuangzi*, *Da sheng* 達生 begins with a somewhat gnomic and abstract passage that reads a bit like a prose poem. We may fairly

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<sup>37</sup> For a strong attack on mystic interpretations of Zhuangzi see Hansen 1981, which I recommend more as a sample of the dismissive attitude philosophers sometimes take towards mysticism than for its actual arguments. The problem, briefly, is that mysticism deals too much with ineffability and non-abstract, non-systematic phenomena to be taken seriously by modern professional philosophy. For a discussion of this exact point see Jones 2016.

suppose that these passages relate in some way to the individual stories within the chapter, so let us turn to the opening such “prose poem” in the *Da sheng* 達生.

Those who fathom life’s true nature [達生之情者] do not labor [不務] over what they can do nothing about.

Those who fathom fate’s true nature [達命之情者] do not labor over what understanding cannot change.

To nourish the body [養形] requires, first and foremost, things [物], but some people have more than enough and still fail to nourish the body.

To live [有生] one must, first and foremost, not depart the body [無離形], but some people cleave to the body and lose life [生亡] anyway.

Life’s arrival cannot be refused, and life’s departure cannot be stopped.

Alas! Humans in the world think nourishing the body sufficient to preserve life [養形足以存生], but in the end, that’s not enough. What in the world is worth doing [則世奚足為哉]?

Though it may not be worth doing, it cannot be left undone—it is unavoidable [其為不免矣].<sup>38</sup>

The character *sheng* 生 appears seven times in this opening section. A fair translation into English is “life” both in the narrower sense of “biological living things” and the broader sense of “vitality” or the more philosophical “coming into being.” This opening prose poem distinguishes between life (*sheng* 生) and the physical body (*xing* 形): *xing* seems necessary but not sufficient for *sheng*. It’s possible to nourish the *xing* 形 with the things of the world (*wu* 物) and still lose one’s *sheng* 生. This indicates that preserving one’s life (*cun sheng* 存生) requires the physical body but that cultivation of the physical body cannot alone constitute a fulfilled (*zu* 足) life. The text has an almost mournful tone (*bei fu* 悲夫,

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<sup>38</sup> *Zhuangzi* 19 (*Da sheng* 達生), 683. Translation my own with reliance on Ziporyn 2009, 77 and Watson 2013, 145. For the sake of reading clarity, I have arranged the passage in English as a kind of prose poem as seems fitting to me based on the rhythm of the original.

“alas!” or “how piteous”) when it mentions that most people of the world think that nurturing *xing* 形 and preserving *sheng* 生 are identical—they are missing something important, the text suggests. But what?

The Warring States Ruist (*ru* 儒, a more technical term for what we often call “Confucian”) philosopher Xunzi 荀子 famously criticizes Zhuangzi by writing:

莊子蔽於天而不知人。 。 。 。 。 。 由天謂之道，盡因矣。 <sup>39</sup>

Zhuangzi was blinded by Heaven and did not see Man... In labeling the Way as Heaven, he takes the Way to be entirely a matter of following along with things.

The story of Woodworker Qing ends with the sort of statement that Xunzi may have pointed to: “I’m just matching Heaven with Heaven” (*yi tian he tian* 以天合天). In fact, many who see Woodworker Qing’s bell stands assume that they are daemonic in origin because they seem to surpass mere human craft. It is beyond my present scope to adjudicate between Xunzi and Zhuangzi, but perhaps an answer to my earlier question can be illuminated by taking Xunzi’s point seriously. According to the prose poem, those who mistake nurturing the body (*xing* 形) with preserving life (*sheng* 生) are missing something. Xunzi, from another direction, accuses Zhuangzi of missing something: namely, the human realm as distinct from *tian* 天 (“nature, Heaven, etc.”). Perhaps the prose poem and Xunzi are both pointing to the same thing from different vantages. And then we have Woodworker Qing, defending his bell stands against accusations of otherworldliness while still noting the importance of harmonizing with Heaven and not

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<sup>39</sup> Xunzi Chapter 21 (*jie bi* 解蔽). My translation.

just carving like any normal artisan. Woodworker Qing is the lynchpin, so I want to try and understand what he is up to.

Generally, *tian* 天 in the *Zhuangzi* refers to nature in all its complexities and transformations. It includes but is far greater than humankind. *Tian* 天 is the world as it is, without the judgments, artifices, constructions, systems, classifications, and categories made by human beings. A persistent theme throughout the *Zhuangzi* is that such human constructs project onto nature distinctions and values that are not really there. We humans then cling to these self-made categories, thus failing to recognize the world as it really is. In addition to just getting it wrong when it comes to the world, then, we also end up suffering when faced with the unpleasant truth that our categories are not the real deal. This results in much frustration and trying to force things rather than going with the flow of what is. The *Zhuangzi* contains numerous variations on this theme, but like a musical motif, it resurfaces over and over throughout the whole in one form or another.

Kim-chong Chong insists that we not set up any firm distinction between the human and the Natural, between *ren* 人 and *tian* 天. He reads both Butcher Ding and Woodworker Qing as instances in which success cannot be easily attributed to humanity or to Heaven.<sup>40</sup> The two skillful masters “are both craftsmen—those accused of destroying nature in [other *Zhuangzi* chapters].”<sup>41</sup> Butcher Ding develops his craft to the point of godlike fluency (*shen* 神), which according to Kim “manifests in [Ding’s] no

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<sup>40</sup> Chong 2019, 239.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

longer [being] dependent on his sense organs, such that he is able to act with remarkable ease and beauty.”<sup>42</sup> While I disagree with Chong about the literal cessation of Butcher Ding’s physical senses, I fully agree with his conclusion: “[t]he notion of [*shen* 神] here connotes the vital ability which he has to connect with the object such that the process and its result (the carving of an ox) are inadequately described as just a human action.”<sup>43</sup> Butcher Ding is doing something so virtuosic that it borders on the inhuman and so is called: *shen* 神—but it is neither fully human nor fully of Heaven.

Everyone who sees Qing’s bell stands believe them to be the product of spirits or ghosts, but Qing himself denies any sort of daemonic influence. His explanation is, as several scholars have noted, an ironic nod to shamanic practices of the day.<sup>44</sup> Shamans (*wu* 巫, *shenwu* 神巫, *wuzhu* 巫祝) were believed to possess some art or skill (*shu* 術) of communicating with spirits. Elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*, the shamanic figure Ji Xian 季咸 is ruthlessly parodied as incompetent at best and a fraud at worst, someone who tries and fails to exert any power or knowledge over nature and its cycles.<sup>45</sup> Woodworker Qing’s story has a similar ironic flavor to it in that what appears to the uninformed viewer to be the work of spirits is in fact not. There are no literal ghosts involved, Qing tells us, just a series of practices undertaken by a mortal man. In “matching Heaven with Heaven” Woodworker Qing reminds us that humans are a part of nature: he (a human) tries to

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Chong 2019 gives an overview.

<sup>45</sup> *Zhuangzi* 7 (*Ying di wang* 應帝王). Cf. Moeller and D’Ambrosio 2017, 94–97.



perceive nature on its own terms (suitable and unsuitable trees) and then meet it. An inferior woodworker would take just about any tree, chop it, steam and bend the wood, forcing it into the shape he wants. This is like the inferior butcher that Ding describes: hacking and forcing the ox carcass to conform rather than following the natural joints (*tian li* 天理).

I have argued that philosophy as a love of clarity is the search for meaningful resonances in the world. Things resonate with us when they are clear, when they cohere in a way that makes sense, even if not a logical or systematic way. Modern professional philosophy is an attempt to secure human thinking from error. Poetic philosophy is an attempt to perceive the lineaments of reality. Classical Chinese turns out to have a term that gets fairly close to this: *tian li* 天理 (“Heavenly patterns” or “lineaments of Nature”). Butcher Ding explicitly uses the term—its first appearance in the extant literature of the time, and Woodworker Qing, I think, is describing the same thing.

*Li* 理 is a complex term in Chinese philosophy. Common English translations include “principle,” “order,” “pattern,” “truth,” “reason,” “Logos,” “structure,” “coherence,” and more. Like *tian* 天 and *shen* 神, *li* 理 never means exactly the same thing in all contexts. Ziporyn gives the following explanation:

It starts out as a homely verb meaning to divide things up in a certain way. Intermittently it comes to be picked up as a useful marker of something that is hard to say otherwise.. it comes to denote coherence itself.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ziporyn 2012, 11. Ziporyn has written a two-book project on *li* 理 in the history of Chinese philosophy. It is dense and difficult and has concerns beyond mine here, but it is an interesting exploration of the term.

*Tian li* 天理, then, are the divisions that exist in the world quite apart from the categories cast onto the world by humans. *Tian li* 天理 are the lineaments of reality that poetic philosophy tries to perceive, the coherences of things, the way things hang together that we glimpse and so experience meaning.

What does Woodworker Qing do to be able to see the nature of trees (*guan tian xing* 觀天性)? What allows him to discern the structure (*li* 理) inherent to the trees such that he recognizes suitable and unsuitable? Unlike Wheelwright Bian, Woodworker Qing does not seem to have any issue with language, although like the wheelwright and the butcher, our woodworker does *describe* his practice without really *telling* his interlocutor how to do it. We get the sense that if the Marquis of Lu were to fast his mind (and what does this mean?) and then sit very still in the woods staring at trees, he probably would not be able to carve bell stands as preternaturally beautiful as Qing's. I want to highlight two things Qing mentions that help him perceive the lineaments.

First, Qing does not waste his energy (*hao qi* 耗氣). *Qi* 氣 is a key term in early Chinese philosophic and medicinal discourses often translated as “essence” or “vital energy” but also more literally as “breath” (with all the metaphorical “breath of life” connotations as in the English). It is the energy out of which the “myriad things” (*wanwu* 萬物) of our world are made. It plays a large role in self-cultivation literature. For example, Mencius 孟子 says that *qi* 氣 is what nurtures *yi* 義 (“rightness”) in the *xin* 心 (“heart-mind”).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Mencius* 2A:6.

In one noteworthy mention of *qi* 氣 in the *Zhuangzi*, Confucius instructs his student Yan Hui: “Don’t listen with your ear but with your mind. Don’t listen with your mind but with your *qi*.”<sup>48</sup> This process is something Confucius calls *xinzhai* 心齋 (“fasting the mind”). It’s different, he tells Yan Hui, from standard-issue ritual fasting wherein one abstains from food or drink. *Qi* 氣, Confucius explains, “Is being empty and waiting on things. The Way gathers only in emptiness—emptiness is the fasting of the mind.”<sup>49</sup> The gesture to something beyond the physical senses and ordinary mental processes fits with what we have already seen in Butcher Ding and Wheelwright Bian.

Woodworker Qing does not squander his *qi* 氣, and he fasts to still his mind (*qi yi jing xin* 齊以靜心). Compare the result of Qing’s fasting with the results of Yan Hui’s meditative practice as seen in another section of the *Zhuangzi*:

**Woodworker Qing:** And after seven days of fasting, I’m so still that I forget [忘] I have four limbs and a body [四枝形體]. By then, there’s no nobles, no court [無公朝]. My skill is focused and outside distractions all slip away [其巧專而外骨消]. After all that, I enter the mountain woods and contemplate nature [觀天性].

**Yan Hui:** I just sit and forget [坐忘]... My limbs and torso drop away [墮肢體], my senses and perceptions chased off [黜聰明]. I disperse the body [離形] and farewell knowing [去知], and I become one with vast openness [同於大通]. I call this “sitting and forgetting.”<sup>50</sup>

We have good reason to regard these two experiences as similar from a phenomenological standpoint at least. Both emphasize physical and mental stillness, inattention to the

<sup>48</sup> *Zhuangzi* 4 (*Ren jian shi* 人間世), 161: 無聽之以耳而聽之以心，無聽之以心而聽之以氣。

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*: 氣也者，虛而待物者也。唯道集虛。虛者，心齋也。

<sup>50</sup> *Zhuangzi* 6 (*Da zong shi* 大宗師), 310.

physical body, an openness to the external world. We do not learn from either Yan Hui or Woodworker Qing exactly how to initiate any of this. As far as following instructions goes, we don't know what sort of fasting Qing undertakes. But recall the opening prose poem's reference to something beyond merely nourishing the body being necessary for "preserving life" (*cun sheng* 存生). It would be a mistake to read Woodworker Qing as literally losing his body in some way. We are not dealing with a transcendent or supernatural level here. But whatever is going on goes beyond the purely empirical senses.

The second thing to note about Qing's perceiving the lineaments (*li* 理) follows from the cultivation of *qi* 氣 and the fasting he undergoes. Even after entering a state of stillness, Woodworker Qing must spend yet more time contemplating nature (*guan tian xing* 觀天性). The word *guan* 觀 specifically connotes a kind of focused or purposeful looking, distinct from ordinary seeing (*jian* 見) in the way we see whatever happens to wander into our field of vision. This is a small but important point: having done away with all his other concerns and even with awareness of his own body, Qing does not just sit in the forest doing nothing—he *attends* to the world around him. Iris Murdoch writes of attention:

We use our imagination not to escape the world but to join it, and this exhilarates us because of the distance between our ordinary dulled consciousness and an apprehension of the real... The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy, and despair.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Murdoch 1997, 374 and 375.

Woodworker Qing is able to select the best trees for carving because he can see clearly the reality of the forest around him. “The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real” trees and “prevent it from returning...to the self,” which in Qing’s case is helped his having forgotten his body, his social commitments, his cares and worries.

My point here is that Woodworker Qing clears away his cognitive clutter. I have identified at least two sorts of cognitive clutter that prevent us from perceiving the world as it is: the ego or self and *doxa*, the convenient Ancient Greek word that covers social habits and norms, opinions, and misguided beliefs. Qing forgets himself and lets go of worries about the court and nobility, reward and reputation—in other words, *doxa*. Only once he has cleared the cognitive clutter can he contemplate the natural world. Thus, contrary to stereotypical generalizations about Daoism and Zhuangzi, it is not that Qing “does nothing.” Such an understanding of *wuwei* 無為 (“non-purposive action” or “inactive action”) misses the hard work that goes into cultivating stillness. And what does he see when he contemplates? True nature: *tian xing* 天性—what a gestalt theorist might call the inner structure of a thing.

This finally returns us to my opening remarks for this skill story. Woodworker Qing matches Heaven with Heaven (*yi tian he tian* 以天合天), and he does this, I claim, without relying on any supernatural or shamanistic elements. *Tian* 天 is the natural world, the larger sphere of becoming itself within which humans are but one tiny fleck. To join Heaven with Heaven is to still oneself, to open oneself even as one shifts attention away from the self. And in this still openness, we make room for the external, real world.

Murdoch again: “[t]he human mind is potentially connected with an obscure elsewhere; and traditionally the poets, as inspired beings, could also count as seers...”<sup>52</sup> Murdoch’s “obscure elsewhere” is not a literally transcendent realm. Elsewhere is right here. Or rather, elsewhere is “out there,” past our cognitive clutter. To try and explain it in words is to trip ourselves up in analysis. All the skillful master can do is *describe* or *show*—he cannot *tell*.

The fact that human action in the world can sometimes seem connected to an “obscure elsewhere” is no reason to posit literal transcendence. Butcher Ding never leaves behind his intensely physical carving, and Wheelwright Bian needs his body to feel things out. What Butcher Ding calls *shen* 神 is what Wheelwright Bian cannot put into words, a state described by Woodworker Qing. Butcher Ding sees the natural lineaments (*tian li* 天理) in the ox just as Woodworker Qing sees the inner nature (*xing* 性) of the trees around him. Neither of these can be fully accounted for with the physical senses, but that’s less an indictment of the physical senses than an acknowledgment that some sorts of knowing go beyond what is empirically observable and teachable.<sup>53</sup> Wheelwright Bian needs no quantifying tools because, as we see in Woodworker Qing and Butcher Ding, virtuoso practice is not about analyzing and manipulating the world but about keeping quiet,

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 407.

<sup>53</sup> Graziani 2019: “We have seen how the non-discursive universe of the sage impacted on the literary techniques of depiction of mastery in the *Zhuangzi*. Questions on how to attain the Way or how to transform people may be ejected as absurd and silly by various sages, but precisely if such questions were not posed and cast in a dialogue, there would be no lessons for the readers, not even a negative instruction” (81).

letting the world speak, trying to hear what it has to say, and then resonating (*ying* 應) with it.

## §7, Conclusion

Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.  
—Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

*Laborare est orare* (“To work is to pray”)  
—Benedictine Order motto

I want to end with the suggestion that the skillful masters of the *Zhuangzi* show us something like prayer in their un-selfing and attention to the external world. These masters do not practice for the sake of anything else. James D. Sellmann notes: “[a]lthough instrumental reasoning can easily lead one to focus on the pragmatic outcomes depicted in these stories...the proposed pragmatic outcomes are merely a kind of collateral result of effortless, free actions in the flow of experience.”<sup>54</sup> Submerging oneself in the flow of experience, in existence itself, in the world as it is does not work if we approach our practice instrumentally, trying to gain something. That would rely overmuch on the ego. The skillful masters overcome the cognitive clutter of the ego and of *doxa*, and in so doing catch a glimpse of meaningful coherence (*tian li* 天理) in the world. When they act, they therefore act with an awareness that cannot be measured or put into words.

In my teaching, I have found that a common misunderstanding students have of prayer is that we pray to get things we want. This is a utilitarian view of prayer. Our

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<sup>54</sup> Sellmann 2019, 112.

responses to the question “*what is prayer for?*” reveal a fair many things about our views of the world and humanity’s place within it. One way of understanding the philosophers of Warring States China is to organize them according to what they think of the relationship between humans and *tian* 天.<sup>55</sup> We saw that Xunzi attacks Zhuangzi for a preoccupation with *tian* 天 at the expense of focusing on human affairs. It may be unsurprising, then, that Xunzi sees prayer and ritual as things we do to ourselves, not as ways to get something from Heaven. Franklin Perkins notes that Xunzi exhibits “a radical displacement of nature as the dominant force in human life, replacing it with the historically constituted human community.”<sup>56</sup> Xunzi himself writes:

故明於天人之分，則可謂至人矣。<sup>57</sup>

Thus, one who clearly sees the divisions between Heaven and Human can be called a person of utmost achievement.

For Xunzi, in other words, we pray and perform rituals not for any outcome but for the effects of prayer and ritual on us. Perhaps this is not so different from Zhuangzi’s skillful masters. They do not act in order to get something, be it fame or wealth or even wheels, bell stands, and sirloins. The non-utilitarian dimension of the skillful masters suggests that their practices aim at something else, something maybe like Xunzi’s notion of prayer.

The idea of course is that prayer need not come with a personal God. Weil was an atheist (a strange sort of atheist, but still), for example, and Xunzi certainly did not believe

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<sup>55</sup> Perkins 2014 does just this, masterfully so. Covering much of the same material but with a different approach and goals is Puett 2002.

<sup>56</sup> Perkins 2014, 184.

<sup>57</sup> *Xunzi* 17 (*Tian lun* 天論), §1.



in any kind of anthropomorphic gods. My attempt to read texts without distortion from modern dichotomies like theory-practice or form-content means that what often seem two separate realms actually collapse into one. I argued that Plato's Forms are real but that we do not need a metaphysical transcendence to say so. That sort of non-transcendent realism holds for Zhuangzi too. Similarly, prayer can be repurposed away from its metaphysical and traditionally religious contexts and used instead to promote a quiet contemplativeness of the world and its resonance. Murdoch captures something of what I mean: "Learning can be praying, breathing can be praying. Prayer is keeping quiet and hoping for the light."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Murdoch 1997, 518.

## CONCLUSION

And then I realized that I had wandered into a maze of narrow streets, the walls on either side too high to glimpse the gold dome of my landmark, and I began to walk more quickly, spurred by the unease that always claims me when I lose track of where I am.

Garth Greenwell, *Cleanness*

Understanding some thinkers is like climbing a mountain, and understanding other thinkers is like exploring a very old city.<sup>1</sup> The mountain thinkers present a tedious and difficult climb that often requires detours or even descents, long pauses, and technical mountaineering to cross gaps or survive the elements. Once you reach reach the summit, however, you know precisely where you are, and the vistas spread out before you clearly and sensibly for your having been through them. Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, Han Feizi, Xunzi, Hobbes, and Spinoza are all good examples. They are tough but disciplined thinkers, orderly even when that order is hard-won. Their beauty is severe and sublime.

But other thinkers are like an ancient city. You study them for years the way you grow to appreciate and know a labyrinthine city—something like Rome with layer upon layer of history and ruins and modernity. Individual neighborhoods often define a whole era: think of the “historic Chinatown” in San Francisco or the vanishing *hutongs* 胡同 of Beijing, the medieval crypts and churches in Paris juxtaposed with the glass and steel of global modernity. You can spend a lifetime in certain cities without ever coming to truly know them: there is always another cobblestone alleyway or changing neighborhood, and influxes of people to the city will come and go but indelibly leave their stamp upon it. The

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow this delightful metaphor from an essay by Erich Heller on Wittgenstein and Nietzsche (Heller 1965, 376–392).

ancient city thinkers seem most often to be those rare creatures who are thinkers and artists both: Augustine, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Pascal—and of course, Plato and Zhuangzi.

Plato and Zhuangzi have a special affinity with this metaphor. The *Zhuangzi* in recent years has probably been the most-discussed early Chinese text in terms of dating, composition, editing, and so on. Many attempt to organize the text's thirty-three chapters into some sort of authorial and systematic sense, and those debates already have to deal with the fact that the extant thirty-three chapter version is neither the original (if there ever was one) nor the oldest we know of—merely the one we happen to have.<sup>2</sup> There will always be another “neighborhood” in the *Zhuangzi* suggestive of an entire era or school of thought or commentarial viewpoint. Similarly, the Platonic dialogues only *appear* to offer the panoptic view so many want to ascribe to them. Dialogues contradict each other and themselves, and the added difficulty of Plato's letters only complicates our efforts to have a neat and systematic map of the city that is Plato.

None of this means we can't think clearly and rigorously about these two figures. The impossibility of an ultimately stable panoptic viewpoint does not prevent us from wandering a city and learning about it, from developing and clarifying an appreciation of it and of ourselves as we wander. This alternative mode of philosophizing I have called “poetic philosophy,” thinking in love with clarity as resonance rather than as systematic analysis. A small but distinct number of contemporary philosophers have embarked on

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<sup>2</sup> Yang 2012, Klein 2011, Littlejohn 2011, Billeter 2010 and 2008, Chen 2010, Chai 2008, Höchsmann and Yang 2007, Graziani 2006, Wang 2002, Lie 1994, Roth 1993, Graham 1980. See Kohn 2014 for an overview.

their own meta-philosophical projects with their own terminologies, goals, and bones to pick, many of which have informed my own approach.<sup>3</sup> My own distinct contribution has been to focus on form.

Form is content. Written form or style is neither a plain nor a decorative container for philosophical ideas but the instantiation of those ideas. This principle holds true for modern texts though less obviously and maybe even less importantly so. For better or worse, professional philosophy and the genre of first-person linear argument have overlapped almost entirely. But given the disparities between what counts as philosophy for us and what counts as philosophy for the ancients, Greek and Chinese, this overlap breaks down. Plato's dialogues and the *Zhuangzi* are not written in the systematic-analytical form of modern philosophy. It seems to me that we have two options, then: we can deny that the dialogues and the *Zhuangzi* are philosophy or we can expand our notion of what counts as philosophy—I have argued for the latter.

This dissertation takes aim at two goals simultaneously. On the one hand, I have made hermeneutic arguments about how we ought to interpret Plato and Zhuangzi with attention to their written forms. On the other hand, I think that these new interpretations of historical figures result from broadening our notions of philosophy itself. To this end, I have taken a broad view of what counts as “form.” Form as an expansive philosophical

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<sup>3</sup> John T. Lysaker's *Philosophy, Writing, & the Character of Thought* (Lysaker 2018), Michael Hampe's *What Is Philosophy For?* (Hampe 2018), Christopher Hamilton's *Living Philosophy* (Hamilton 2001), Alexander Nehamas' *The Art of Living* (Nehamas 1998), Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (MacIntyre 1984)—and, most influential for me personally, Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Hadot 1995) and Jan Zwicky's *Lyrical Philosophy* (Zwicky 1995). Philosophers who do not engage explicitly in this meta-philosophical questioning but whose work nonetheless models it include, among many, Jonathan Lear's *Open Minded* and *Wisdom Won from Illness* (Lear 1998 and 2017) and Martha Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness* and *Love's Knowledge* (Nussbaum 1986 and 1990).

category, in the words of David Tracy, consists of “the idea of the real as, in essence, its appearance in form and its availability to all education-as-transformation in and through the many forms disclosive of Form itself.”<sup>4</sup> Form can be the written style of a text or the architecture of a building, but form can also be a gesture which embodies (sometimes literally) a communicative act (a shrug of the shoulders or a quirked eyebrow). More, “form” translates the German “Gestalt,” and I have explored both classic and contemporary gestalt theory to talk about forms in an even broader way. I have defined the experience of meaningfulness as experiencing a gestalt shift, which is to say, perceiving a form, which is to say, seeing how things cohere or hang together. The idea of form thus operates at several different levels throughout this dissertation.

Form as I have argued for it presents itself as a fruitful comparative category. Perceiving resonant forms is the experience of meaningfulness and truthfulness, and we have no good reason to suppose that these experiences are not common to all peoples and places. Here the contemporary research into gestalts is instructive since it builds on experimentally reproducible hypotheses about human biology. Human beings perceive gestalts (forms that resonate by virtue of their being integrated), and analytic thought including language interferes with these gestalt perceptions. Analytic and linguistic creatures that we are, however, we attempt to express ourselves anyway, and language that is particularly alert to this struggle is what I call poetic language. The complexities of comparison enter at this point. Gestalt perceptions may be common to all peoples and places, but how we respond to, understand, and express those perceptions differs widely.

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<sup>4</sup> Tracy 1998, 237.

Form as a category is not intended as an oversimplifying universalism but as a recognition of common humanity that still allows for acknowledgment of diversity. In fact, paying attention to something like forms *requires* us to attend to the diversity of particular texts, styles, etc. When we are struck by a resonant form, it is because that form is integrated: it coheres in such a way that to change it would throw off its resonance, which is its meaning. That means we have to look at *how* a particular text resonates or means, and *that* means we have to attend to its language, historical context, cultural assumptions, and so on. So the universality of forms redirects our attention to the diversity and particularity of things.



The orthodox view of Plato approaches him as dualist who posits a literal metaphysical system crowned with the Theory of Forms. I have argued that there is no such theory in the modern sense of the word in the dialogues. The Forms only ever appear in fragments across Plato's work, always in unique contexts, usually in the form of mythic and poetic metaphors and images, and rarely ever given a sustained and concluding treatment. Attempts to read Plato's form often make admirable observations but in the end still try to show how some myth or metaphor merely illustrates the Theory of Forms of the Theory of the Tripartite Soul. Such an approach comes to Plato with a preconceived notion of what he's up to: namely, laying down some elaborate and literary doctrine.

Chapter Two showed some initial cracks in this orthodox view by looking closely at the *Phaedrus*. First, I highlighted a famous tension: the *Phaedrus* contains the most

withering critique of written language in all of Plato despite being an elaborately written text itself. By taking Socrates' objections to writing in turn, I argued that at worst his problems with writing just don't hold up and at best apply equally to the spoken word. I suggested that the *Phaedrus* is best understood as a kind of love letter, a *logos erōtikos*, which is a written text alive with meaning—in other words, a resonant form. To mean is to resonate, and to resonate is to move. Socrates himself makes this point when he says that the problem with the written word is that it typically lacks soul: “ensouled discourse” (*empsukhon logon*) is the kind of language that leads towards wisdom. “Ensouled” (*empsukhon*), I claimed, is just another way of saying discourse that moves and moves us, like Wittgenstein's account of meaning: “meaning is like going up to someone.”<sup>5</sup> The *Phaedrus* is written and yet still alive, still *empsukhon*, because it resonates with us and lures us into asking questions (this is what makes it an erotic text). The remainder of the chapter then showed how Plato deploys intertextuality and allusion to the poets Stesichorus and Sappho to highlight this sense of constant searching and movement. Stesichorus blurs the dichotomy between the particular and the abstract, the individual and the universal. In orthodox Platonism, Plato wants us to abandon the particular in favor of the abstract; so too with modern philosophy, as when Descartes' *Discourse on the Method* urges us to “always to make enumerations so complete, and reviews so general, that I would be certain nothing was omitted.”<sup>6</sup> Plato's intertextual use of Stesichorus, however, suggests that philosophy is not about transcending and abstracting so much as it

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<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein 1953, §457.

<sup>6</sup> Descartes 1960 [1637], 16.

is wrestling with the tension between the two. Sappho appears more obliquely, with Plato alluding to her poetry in his description of the role of love and beauty in philosophy. In particular, Sappho suggests the positive dimensions of forgetting and self-oblivion, two linked notions that orthodox Platonism sees as negatives, as phenomena that keep us trapped in our imperfect bodies with our impure knowledge of the Forms. But a Sapphic reading of the *Phaedrus* reveals that the body and desire and forgetting and self-oblivion are all not just the inciting events of philosophy but the fires that keep it running.

Chapters Three and Four zoomed out from the *Phaedrus* to look at the implications poetic philosophy has for Platonic metaphysics, especially on the so-called Theory of Forms. Chapter Three largely set the stage, putting down my own models of coherence truth and of metaphor. I demonstrated that Socrates' two-step process of *elenkhos* (a negative clearing-away) and *dialektikē* (a positive perception of similarities) shows his affinity to gestalt thought. Metaphor, I argued, is one type of gestalt shift in which we come to see one thing as another thing. Metaphor is an ontological depth charge illuminating the similarities between different forms. As I said in the introduction chapter, the perception of a resonant form is the experience of truth, but this is not truth of a correspondence or verifiable sort. Instead, to come to know a truth is to come to experience a resonant form, and since metaphors are gestalts, metaphors can be resonant forms—metaphors can be true (not just decorative containers for something else that is true). Chapter Four took this idea and claimed that the Forms in Plato are metaphors. I borrowed heavily in both chapters from Iris Murdoch, starting from her remark that “[i]t must be kept in mind that Plato is talking in metaphysical metaphors, myths, images;



there is no Platonic ‘elsewhere’, similar to the Christian ‘elsewhere’.”<sup>7</sup> The Forms are metaphors for real, objective meaning in the world, but they are not literal metaphysical things floating about. I illustrated this with a brief reading of the *Parmenides* in which I argued that the dialogue is not a refutation of Plato’s earlier Theory of Forms (since there is no such thing) but rather a dramatic enactment of what happens when we try to submit gestalt thought to analysis. Plato wants us *perceive* certain external truths, which he gestures to with the metaphor of Forms—the focus is on *perception* and not *analysis*.

Chapter Five turned to the *Zhuangzi* and picked up on the thread of knowing as perception rather than verification. I looked at three key moments in the *Qi wu lun* 齊物論 chapter: the butterfly dream, Nanguo Ziqi’s loss of self, and the pipes of Heaven metaphor. I contended that the text illustrates the attempt to declutter one’s self that we saw in the two-step process of *elenkhos* and *dialektikē* of the previous chapters. Nanguo says, “I lost myself” (*wu sang wo* 吾喪我), and this does not *refer* to the loss of some metaphysical soul or mind but rather *expresses* (à la Wittgenstein) an altered state of existence for him. In this altered state, Nanguo sees past the barriers of his own self to perceive the external world, and what he finds in the world is a kind of emptiness. This emptiness, I argued, is not a nothingness but a space within which integrated forms resonate. As the *Phaedrus* is a resonant form (a moving text, *empsychon logon*) that *means* by evoking movement (questioning) in the reader, so the resonance of the world evokes a similar openness or emptiness in Nanguo. It is this emptiness he tries to illustrate with the metaphor of the

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<sup>7</sup> Murdoch 1992, 399.

pipes of Heaven. My reading of the butterfly dream passage showed a loss of self need not lead to meaningless relativism—so long as we take thinking to be primarily about *perceiving* the lineaments of reality rather than *analyzing* them.

In Chapter Six I explored the relationship between this model of perceptive thinking and skepticism. I proposed a “poetic skepticism” in place of long-running debates about epistemological skepticism in the *Zhuangzi*. Some scholars argue against any kind of analytic or doctrinal skepticism in Zhuangzi but helpfully articulate a less systematic, more therapeutic version instead. I build on that work with particular reference to skill stories in the *Zhuangzi*. Poetic skepticism is a practice of clearing away of the sort seen in Socratic *elenchos* and in the self-forgetting of Nanguo Ziqi and the pipes of Heaven. This clearing aims at a clarity and receptivity to the external world—a world full of meaning (i.e., resonant forms)—exemplified in several of the *Zhuangzi*’s skillful masters: Butcher Ding, Wheelwright Bian, and Woodworker Qing, each of whom emphasizes different facets of perceptive or gestalt thinking.



For a dissertation in comparative literature, I have done relatively little direct comparison of Plato and Zhuangzi. This is partly because each thinker has such a rich body of scholarship that giving a novel interpretation of either already requires an impossible combination of literature review and innovation. The single piece of advice to which I most returned throughout this project is an admonition from Professor Yang Ye to remember that a dissertation is not a *magnum opus* but a *minimum opus*. In that spirit, I have tried to think of the dissertation as staging for future endeavors. I have articulated an idea

of form as a comparative category, one that allows for different languages, cultures, and genres as well as taking into account historical processes like the *Zhuangzi*'s being a composite text. Let me close with a brief nod to some large questions looming on my horizon.

Long ago upon entering the Ph.D. program, my plan was to write a dissertation about the self in early Greece and China. I quickly realized that the topic was almost unmanageably vast just in one culture, to say nothing of two. However, my interest in a philosophic-poetic description of the self remains one root of this dissertation. In Chapter One, I began from an observation that humans are imperfect creatures characterized by an array of tensions. We are irrational and desirous, embodied and imaginative, rational and ignorant. We cannot know everything we want to know, do everything we want to do, and we are mortals condemned to die. We are on every frontier limited or finite, and I remain drawn to Plato and Zhuangzi precisely because they express something of this finitude in their writings. Martha Nussbaum articulates something of this connection in this beautiful passage:

Clearly there ought to be connections between the way a thinker or writer conceives of the soul and the way he or she constructs a discourse to convey important truths to such a soul—including, and especially, the truth about the nature of the soul. Whether we are to be approached with sunbeams or daggers, whether we need light or violent motion to show us what we are: this seems to depend upon what, in fact, we are. On the answer to questions such as: Are our souls transparent? opaque? thick-skinned? And: is getting in touch with a human soul like shining light through a diamond? Like embracing a friend? Like drawing blood? To speak more prosaically, on the answers to questions such as : How does a soul arrive at truth? What elements does it have that promote and impede understanding? What is the subject matter or content of the most important truths about it? And in what sort of activity does knowing it consist? A story or account of the soul is, then, told. The telling, if the story is a good one, is not accidentally connected with the content of the told. And this ought to be so whether the teller is a literary artist, whom we

suppose always to be conscious of the nature of the stylistic choices, or a philosopher, whom we often think of as avoiding or eschewing style altogether.<sup>8</sup>

I believe Nussbaum's point holds true for non-Western thinkers as well: the way one writes presupposes something about one's audience, however explicit or unexamined those presuppositions may be. Part of the logic behind poetic philosophy is that humans are imperfect, finite creatures who are not purely rational and analytical. Because we think in ways that include but go beyond language, our writing ought to address us as such.

Despite using that as a starting point to talk about Plato and Zhuangzi, I have for the most part purposefully avoided talking about the self. An obvious exception to this is Chapter Five, which dealt with self in Zhuangzi's butterfly dream passage and the story of Nanguo Ziqi. Partly this was just unavoidable: Nanguo *does* say, "I lost myself," and the chapter gave me a way to introduce the Wittgenstein-inflected idea that self is something we do, not something we have. Self is something we express through our engagement with the world and other beings in it. Self is a kind of call and response, which is the experience of resonant clarity.<sup>9</sup> This circled back to the point from Chapter Two about

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<sup>8</sup> Nussbaum 1990, 245.

<sup>9</sup> Of interest to me but beyond my scope here is the affinity between this call-and-response view of the self with William James' description of religious experience as a call for help. I think also of a scene in Joyce's *Ulysses* in which Stephen Dedalus walks with the teacher Mr. Deasy and tells him that God is "a shout in the street." I think notions like these of faith could have interesting affinities with poetic philosophy because faith is a kind of non-analytic, non-verifiable knowing which is nevertheless meaningful. And as I argued with Plato, we do not need to posit a literal "Platonic elsewhere" (Murdoch's phrase) in order to have objective meaningfulness, which makes me wonder whether there is a possible defense of faith without a literal "elsewhere" (i.e., Heaven, God, etc.). In other words, what would an atheistic faith look like and how might thinkers like Zhuangzi help us articulate it? Another way to think of this: I have argued for an understanding of truth that fits with a phrase like "*he's a true friend*," and so I wonder if something similar could be done with faith and a phrase like "*I have faith in you*"—what Simon Critchley calls a faith of the faithless.

ensouled language (*empsukhon logon*) being language that calls out and evokes a response: that movement or activity *is* meaning, much as it *is* self. Aside from that excursion, though, self has been distinctly absent.

Some of the difficulties of using self as a comparative category can be avoided by using form as a category instead. I largely agree with arguments put forward by G.E.R. Lloyd that the best way to do comparative work is to compare problematics.<sup>10</sup> That is, identifying something called “self” (or “soul” or “mind”) in, say, Greek culture and then investigating the presence or lack of that same something in, say, Chinese culture risks distortion, over-generalization, and cherry-picked evidence (i.e., we see in the Chinese sources only that which somehow echoes with our original Greek sources). To avoid this, Lloyd suggests we look not for similar or dissimilar topics, ideas, terms, etc. but rather for comparable *problems* that the two cultures may have been trying to solve. For example, the conceptual underpinnings of ancient Greek and Chinese medicine are different: different notions of the body, of disease, of environmental factors, of human nature in relation to animals and the supernatural, and so on. Despite all that, both cultures faced the problem of humans falling ill and wanting to explain, treat, and prevent it.<sup>11</sup>

One advantage of my broad use of form for comparative work is that it stands in for the sort of problematic Lloyd is talking about. Certainly we cannot project modern and mostly Western dichotomies like form/content onto the ancients, be they Greek or Chinese. But, if we understand the experience of meaning as the perception of coherent

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<sup>10</sup> See Lloyd 1996 for a succinct but thorough treatment of this topic, which does come up repeatedly throughout Lloyd’s work.

<sup>11</sup> Kuriyama 1999 is an elegant study on this very comparative point.

wholes, and if we understand this experience as antithetical to analysis, then it makes sense we should find in both Greece and China the problematic of how to articulate meaningful experiences without betraying those experiences.

Now, what if we want to do comparative work on self between Greece and China while also avoiding the essentialization and over-generalization of which Lloyd warns? I think form helps us here. If Nussbaum is correct that the way we write reveals something of what we take the self to be, then we can compare self by looking at how certain authors write—and this is form. Which authors? That is debatable. I have started here with Plato and Zhuangzi because they seem to me particularly alert to the problem of ineffability: the difficulty of articulating in language meaningful experience. As a shorthand for that shared quality, I have called them both poetic writers, and it is on this point that I will turn towards an ending, by returning to the poem *Post-Construction* by Kay Ryan.

Who knows better  
than the builder  
not to trust  
a structure, where  
it's off kilter,  
how too few  
rafters bear  
too much roof?  
And still it  
may stand, proof  
against craft,  
strong as though  
ghost ribs  
had been added  
after one left.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ryan 2010, 251.

Plato and Zhuangzi are builders of texts who know “not to trust” their own structures. They know that language, even poetic language, cannot adequately capture the experience of meaning or gestalt insights or whatever else you want to call it. They know “how too few / rafters bear / too much roof.” Poetic language gestures at something beyond itself, at a meaningfulness blocked by language—what Ryan calls “ghost ribs.” Poetic philosophy is about trying to shine the light *just so* to make the ghost ribs visible. I suspect the human self may be a similar sort of construct, something that appears much stabler and solider than it really is, something is is propped up with ghost ribs.

A further study may someday explore how the ghost ribs of the self and of a poetic text entangle. Poetic language is that language which is aware of its own imperfections and inability to fully express the truth. A poetic sense of self might be the same: a self with an intimate sense of its own finitude. Here I think of oblivions, which I described in Chapter Two as “the state of being unaware of or unconscious of what is happening; the state of being forgotten.”<sup>13</sup> Oblivion can translate the Ancient Greek *lēthē* (“forgetting”) and its relative *lanthanō* (“look away, escape notice, overlook, conceal”). *Alētheia* (“truth”) is just *lēthē* with “not” (*a*) attached to it: for something to be true is for it to be remembered, not lost to oblivion. The Classical Chinese *wang* 忘 has a similar range of meanings: “forget, omit, neglect.” Its semantic components are *xin* 心 (“mind”) and *wang* 亡 (“destroy, perish, flee, pass away”), so to forget in the Classical Chinese is also to be

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<sup>13</sup> *OED*, s.v. The word “oblivion” is not just a synonym for “destruction” and is in fact derived from the Latin *oblivisci* (“forget”).

concealed or lost to oblivion.<sup>14</sup> I argued briefly in Chapters Two and Six that oblivions are one way that we relinquish attention in order to focus on something else—they are both annihilative and recuperative. That tension is the same sort of tension in a poetic text: language both does and does not capture meaningful experience, hence the ghost ribs. In Chapter One I offered a quotation from Heraclitus to describe such tension: “They don’t perceive how, being brought apart, it is brought together with itself—a back-bending harmony, as in a bow and lyre.”<sup>15</sup> That back-bending harmony is something poetic texts and the self share.

Consider one of the *Zhuangzi*’s most famous depictions of oblivion:

Yan Hui said, “I’m making progress [回益矣].”

Confucius said, “What do you mean?”

“I’ve forgotten all about humaneness and duty [回忘仁義].”

“Okay, but you’re not there yet [猶未].”

He came another day and said, “I’m making progress.”

Confucius asked, “What do you mean?”

“I’ve forgotten all about propriety and music [回忘禮樂].”

“Okay, but you’re not there yet.”

He came yet again another day and said, “I’m making progress.”

Confucius asked, “How so?”

“I just sit and forget [坐忘].”

Confucius, startled, asked, “What do you mean... ‘sit and forget?’”

Yan Hui replied, “My limbs and torso drop away [墮肢體], my senses and perceptions chased off [黜聰明]. I disperse the body [離形] and farewell knowing [去知], and I become one with vast openness [同於大通]. I call this ‘sitting and forgetting.’”

Confucius said, “Become one with it? So...free of all preferences [無好]... Transforming and thus free of all stability [化則無常]... You really are a worthy [賢] fellow! I humbly beg to be your disciple.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> On the theme of concealment and hiddenness in Classical Chinese literature, see Varsano 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Heraclitus, D-K Fr.51: οὐ ζυγιάσιν ὄκως διαφερόμενον ἑωτῶ ὁμολογέει · παλίντροπος ἀρμονίη ὄκωσπερ τόξου καὶ λύρης. My translation.

<sup>16</sup> *Zhuangzi* 6 (*Da zong shi* 大宗師), 308–311.



Livia Kohn describes Yan Hui’s practice of “sitting and forgetting” (*zuowang* 坐忘) as “[t]he withdrawal of the senses and dissolution of perception into the flow of vital energy.”<sup>17</sup> As we saw in the case of Nanguo Ziqi, oblivion here is a relinquishing of attention to oneself in favor of attention to some meaningful form outside the self: the pipes of Heaven in Nanguo’s case and merger with “vast openness” (*da tong* 大通) in Yan Hui’s case. The body, ordinary perceptions, social engagements like ritual and music—all of this is left behind in an oblivion that opens up to a new awareness.

Consider also an oblivion in the *Phaedrus*, this imagistic description of the human soul after it has seen the beautiful beloved (another oblivion there) and sprouted wings:

ἦν ὅταν τὸ τῆδέ τις ὄρων κάλλος, τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἀναμνησκόμενος, περῶταί τε καὶ ἀναπτερούμενος προθυμούμενος ἀναπτέσθαι, ἀδυνατῶν δέ, ὄρνιθος δίκην βλέπων ἄνω, τῶν κάτω δὲ ἀμελῶν, αἰτίαν ἔχει ὡς μανικῶς διακείμενος<sup>18</sup>

Seeing something of beauty here on earth, remembering true beauty, he sprouts wings and desires to spread them and fly, but he cannot. Fixing his gaze upward and neglecting things below, he is accused of madness.

This avian soul, precariously poised between forgetting of its earthly life and remembrance of Forms further illustrates the ambivalent nature of oblivions. The soul does not cleanly take off into the sky, departing the body for the realm of the Forms. It is drawn, pulled towards something meaningful outside of itself—just as Yan Hui becomes one with the vast openness (*da tong* 大通) outside of himself. But Yan Hui does not really abandon all humanity: he still talks, he still tries to explain his experience to another

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<sup>17</sup> Kohn 2014, 127. See also Goh 2011, 122; Billeter 2010, 60; Graziani 2009, 442; Yang 2003, 90; Jochim 1998, 55; Roth 1997; and Robinet 1983.

<sup>18</sup> *Phr.* 249d.

person even though he has ostensibly chased off his senses (*chu congming* 黜聰明) and farewelled his knowledge (*qu zhi* 去知). Just so, the avian soul perches, apart from others as if mad, but never fully leaving the realm of human imperfections behind.

Oblivions as annihilative and recuperative fill the *Phaedrus* and the *Zhuangzi*, but fuller attention to them will have to wait for another day, as will fleshing out the parallels between poetic texts and the imperfect self. Robert Creeley's poem *Echo* gestures towards the way:

Entire memory  
hangs tree  
in mind to see  
a bird be—

but now puts stutter  
to work, shutters  
the windows, shudders,  
sits and mutters—

because can't  
go back, still  
can't get  
out. Still can't.<sup>19</sup>

It is a poem about memory's failure, about oblivions. The first stanza is aspirational: memory aims at perfection. We strive for an “entire memory” so powerful that it “hangs [a] tree / in [the] mind to see.” Memory grants the power to pin entire structures or ideas in the mind—herein lies all the hoped-for grandeur of systematic-analytic thinking. We assume that memories or texts or the self are “entire,” complete enough that we can

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<sup>19</sup> Creeley 1989, 15.

stably hang or build our ideas upon them. And yet in the second stanza these aspirations unravel, and the language performs the unraveling: we have assonance (*but, now, puts, stutter, to, work, shutters, sits, mutters*), consonance (*but, stutters, puts, to, shutters, sits, mutters*), and onomatopoeia (*shutters, mutters*). So the sonic texture of the stanza is bumpy and jagged as if we are hearing how the words are stitched together, adding to the effect of unravelling memory. It catches on the snags of the language. The third stanza then meditates on the entire process. What are we left with once our memories unravel? “Can’t / go back, still / can’t get / out.” We are trapped in a failed remembering almost as if memory is our window to the world, or to our past, our continuous sense of self. This is the tension of the avian soul, of the lover experiencing *ekplēksis* upon seeing the beloved, of the stilled person like Nanguo Ziqi who must still resort to language (metaphors of pipes), of the accomplished Yan Hui who does not seem to have really left behind his awareness at all. The clarity of the first stanza gives way to blockage, and the whole second stanza, separated off with em dashes, is an almost parenthetical comment. If we ignore it, we see that perfect aspirational memory in the first stanza “hang tree / in mind to see” precisely “because can’t / go back.” Memory is salvific. This is orthodox Plato: “*remember the Forms, become godlike, leave behind imperfections.*” Memory seems powerful if we ignore the warnings of the second stanza, if we ignore the stutters, the ghost ribs.

I began this dissertation with a piece of a poem, a question, from Frank Bidart:

After sex & metaphysics, —  
 ...what?  
 What you have made.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bidart, “The Third Hour of the Night” from *Star Dust* (Bidart 2005).

We are embodied creatures full of desire and irrationality, intuition and perception and forgetting (“sex”). We are also rational and abstract, creatures that crave control and analysis, that speak because we cannot help ourselves (“metaphysics”). Beyond any of those dichotomies though, we are makers. We make ourselves in the act of seeking clarity. And we make texts too, texts that hum and dance if we know how to listen. This has been a first attempt, a grasping attempt, to try to do that for Plato and Zhuangzi.

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