

“Plato as Cultural Critic”

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This summer, I attended a summer faculty seminar at the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, D.C., on “The Verbal Art of Plato.” Hosted by Gregory Nagy of Harvard University and Kenny Morrell of Rhodes College, this event brought together a truly interdisciplinary group of teacher-scholars—representing fields ranging from philosophy and classics to psychology and even physics—to discuss the works of Plato, along with other ancient Greek works and some of Dr. Nagy’s scholarship, in a week filled with intensive seminars. Every day for five days, we had four 90-minute sessions a day. While a few were designated as “overflow” sessions to catch up on topics and themes that had built up over time, almost all required new reading—normally a full dialogue of Plato or full book of the *Republic*, paired with other works by Plato’s intellectual rivals. And in what our hosts initially claimed was a pedagogical advice aimed at helping us to sympathize with the burdens we place on our own students, the readings were only distributed about two weeks before the beginning of the seminar.

In short, it was a lot to digest, and I am sure I will continue to mull over the readings and discussions for many years to come. In this talk, I would like to give an initial report of what I learned from the seminar, concluding with some notes about how it has challenged my approach to teaching classic texts and influenced my thinking more generally. Before I begin, though, I will point out that the Center for Hellenic Studies has a similar event every summer, and I strongly encourage you to apply. The application process is simple, and Stuart and I have both

attended seminars and can provide more information and advice to anyone who is interested.

Even if you do not choose to pursue this particular opportunity, I hope I can convey to you how refreshing and rewarding a summer faculty seminar like this can be and encourage my colleagues to pursue one in their field of interest.

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As a faculty member in a Great Books program, I am obviously no stranger to Plato. My relationship with his philosophy goes back further than my affiliation with Shimer, though. In college, my intro to philosophy course was structured around close readings of Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes, and in the years that followed, as a budding Great Bookist, I continued to read Platonic dialogues on my own, more or less out of my sense that an educated person should obviously be acquainted with Plato's work. That dutiful reading ultimately proved formative. I can still vividly remember my sense of building fascination as I worked my way through the *Protagoras*, which was the first time I saw that philosophy could be dramatic and even exciting.

Yet sadly, fascination gradually gave way to scapegoating. As I tried to work out my relationship with Christianity through college, I eventually hit upon the common strategy of claiming that Christianity had somehow been infected by a series of pernicious "Greek" ideas—above all, the mind-body dualism that led to a politically quietistic otherworldly Christianity—that obscured the good and radical core of the Gospel. For adherents of this theory, Plato is the villain of the story. Plato somehow transfixed the early Church Fathers, above all Augustine, and ultimately ruined Christianity from beyond the grave. I ultimately dispensed with that simplistic fall narrative, though even in my dissertation the discerning reader can detect a certain anxiety to prove that certain Church Fathers I viewed favorably were of course not *really* Platonic. (Spoiler alert: they totally were.)

Since then, I have known Plato primarily as a writer whose texts always somehow “work” in the classroom, despite advancing theories—like the aforementioned mind-body dualism, or conceptual realism—that we cannot possibly expect our students to embrace. Hence I was due for a refresher, and the sheer act of reading so much of Plato in such a short period of time was revelatory. One thing that always appealed to me was Plato’s literary art, and reading the dialogues in rapid succession shows how intricately Plato constructed the relationships among the dialogues. In place of faceless yes-men, I started to see recurring characters, whose role in each dialogue helped us to recontextualize their contributions elsewhere. Instead of a generic urban backdrop, I began to see how the implicit dates and locations of the dialogues affected the way we were supposed to read the arguments.

Putting Plato in the context of other Greek texts was revelatory as well. Reading Socrates’ amusing take-down of Lysias in the *Phaedrus* was much more interesting when I had actually read Lysias’s own speeches, many of which deal with convoluted criminal scenarios involving love—and, to be honest, some of them really did have the “and another thing” style of organization that Socrates skewers in the (probably fictional?) speech that Phaedrus has brought to their pastoral idyll. Perhaps more revelatory still, however, was the realization that Socrates’ claim in the *Apology* that he is inexperienced in the ways of the court is virtually *de rigueur* for defendants in Athens—claiming not to know how things are done *is itself* the way things are done.

In other words, the very move by which Socrates seems to be rendering himself exceptional actually marks him as a typical Athenian. And from a certain perspective, this is itself the signature gesture of Plato. We could say that Plato is a critic of Athenian culture, but he is also a critic *of Athenian culture*. Even—perhaps especially—when he is proposing a radical

break with past practice, Plato remains deeply formed by Athenian ideals, rituals, and sources of intellectual authority.

This can be seen most clearly in his complex relationship with Homer, who was in many ways the real topic of our seminar, given that both our hosts are specialists in Homeric poetry. They emphasized again and again the centrality of Homer to Athenian culture and civic life. Though Athens is barely mentioned in the Homeric poems themselves, by the time of Socrates the city of Athens virtually “owned” the art of Homeric recitation, which reinforced its cultural hegemony among the Greek city states. The greatest manifestation of this ownership was the Panathenaic Festival, which is generally less discussed than the Dionysian festivals at which tragedies were performed but arguably more important for Athenian self-identity. The key event in the Panathenaic Festival was a rhapsodic performance that was at once collaborative and competitive. Rhapsodic performers from all over the Greek world would collectively perform the entirety of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in relay fashion, and one of them would be named the champion for that year.

Our view of rhapsodes, to the extent we have one, is colored by Plato’s portrayal of the profession in the *Ion*, where the title character appears to be an arrogant buffoon—one of the few Socratic interlocutors who is too dense even to fight back, instead passively agreeing to every contradictory position Socrates puts forward. In the original context, however, Ion’s attitude of indifference was completely appropriate, because rhapsodes were not merely performers, but intellectual authorities. Someone like Ion, who has won multiple titles, would be the equivalent of a triple-PhD Pulitzer Prize winner in our day, and if anyone is a buffoon in this situation, it’s Socrates, who pedantically badgers the great man instead of basking in his performance.

I imagine that the most incongruous moment for the Athenian reader would have been the moment when Socrates, having induced Ion to give a free rhapsodic performance, rudely cuts him off. As Dr. Nagy clarifies, this is only the beginning of a power play on Socrates' part. In the lines that follow, Socrates is implicitly claiming to have a better knowledge of Homer even than Ion—whereas Ion can start anywhere and then continue moving forward, as required for rhapsodic performance in the Panathenaic Festival, Socrates can actually jump back and forth at will, based not on the set order of the poem but on the themes he wishes to explore. As an amateur pianist, I have a sense of how impressive Socrates' feat is. I have any number of pieces memorized, but I can't just start playing at any point at will—in fact, for a particularly intricate piece like a Bach fugue, if I lose my place, the only solution is to start over from the beginning. If someone could jump around to every passage that has a particular chord or rhythmic pattern, that would represent a much greater command of the music than I could claim to have.

In the *Ion*, Socrates is obviously trying to undercut the authority of rhapsodes as a group, but he is competing on their home turf, as it were, and thereby enshrining Homer's authority. The situation is somewhat different in one of Plato's most controversial dialogues, the *Hippias Minor*, where he ends up arguing that the skilled criminal is morally superior to the incompetent criminal. What our discussion suggested is that Plato has not suddenly embraced Luther's dictum that we should "sin boldly," but rather that the dialogue is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the idea that Homer could provide a moral education. The argument grows out of a dispute over which Homeric hero is the greatest, and it ends in nihilism because none of the heroes is actually great in a morally relevant way. Here again, we have virtuoso performance of Homeric recitation, but with the goal of showing that memorizing and reciting Homer will never produce good citizens.

From here it is easy to trace a straight line to the famous rejection of Homeric poetry from the *Republic*, where Homer's amoral portrayal of gods and heroes is dismissed as unsuitable for training young people (books 2-3) and the very practice of poetry is shown to appeal to a lowly and dangerous aspect of the soul (book 10). Yet even here, there is a tension, because Socrates claims that he can admit poets back into the city if they can deliver their arguments in a philosophical style—and meanwhile, he and his pupils will need to “chant” their arguments to themselves, lest they be too easily convinced by poetic authority. Even more striking is a passage from the *Laws* where the Athenian Stranger evokes the famous “magnet theory” of poetic inspiration from the *Ion*, but as a way of describing the transmission of philosophy. The remedy is the same as the poison, echoing the fact, well-known to readers of Derrida, that the same word, *pharmakon*, is used to refer to both.

Another way of looking at this is that philosophy must seize the power of poetry if it is to found a new city. Philosophy wants to exercise its power *in a different way* than Homeric poetry does, but it also wants to exercise *the same kind of power*—the kind of power that can bind a populace, that can educate the young, that can lend prestige to a city. And once we recognize this fact, we see that the Platonic agenda of seizing the power of poetry is not merely a matter of dotting the I's and crossing the T's in a utopian thought experiment. Plato's text is Homeric through and through, a reweaving of the Homeric fabric for his own ends.

This can be seen at two levels. The first is that of imagery. A striking example here is a thread that starts in the *Ion* and carries through into the *Phaedrus*. The passage that Socrates asks Ion to recite—and abruptly interrupts—comes from Book 23 of the *Iliad*, during the funeral games for Patroclus. Specifically, he is citing Nestor's advice to his son as to how he can win a chariot race. As Harold Stone once pointed out when I was sitting in on his class as a beginning

Shimer faculty member, this advice does not represent amazing insight into chariot racing: try to hug the turn, but not so tightly that you tip over.

In the immediate context, the effect is to undercut Ion's claim that Homer possesses exceptional expertise in all human pursuits. Yet the image of the chariot is oddly insistent throughout the Platonic corpus. Socrates is forever asking his interlocutors who knows the most about horses and chariots, and as Prof. Morrell pointed out, a chariot was not an everyday thing for an Athenian of Socrates' time—it would be akin to me constantly making yacht metaphors in class. Dr. Nagy noted that Homeric interpreters had long attributed an allegorical or moral message to this horse race—perhaps due to the disproportionate attention it gets, perhaps led there by the concluding line of Book 24, “Hector, the breaker of horses”—and Plato's use of the image of the chariot in the *Phaedrus* to describe the inner struggle of the soul is very much in that tradition. He may not explicitly evoke Homer in that context, but he doesn't have to.

The second level at which Plato reweaves the Homeric tapestry is that of his technical language. As Dr. Nagy shows in a blog post on the CHS website (which I am happy to e-mail to anyone who is interested), many of the key terms of Platonic philosophy turn out to be technical terms used by rhapsodes in their performance and interpretation of Homer. Each of the ten terms he lists is surprising in its own way, but for me the most shocking is the one he saves for last: *dialegesthai*, to engage in dialogue. The very term that designates what we think of as *the* distinctive Platonic activity was the term of art for rhapsodes when they engaged in dialogue about Homeric poetry.

Even here, though, we can see a reversal at work, almost a revaluation of values—what was considered the least prestigious and important pursuit for rhapsodes, who engaged in interpretation and dialogue “on the side” but regarded the extended recitation of Homer as the

main event, here becomes the central activity of philosophy as an alternative to poetry, or else as an alternative form of poetry.

Once we see this parallel, examples multiply. For instance, if we keep in mind Plato's appropriation of rhapsodic practice, the extended monologue of the *Timaeus* seems less incongruous. In crafting a philosophical creation myth, Timaeus is effectively rewriting Hesiod's *Theogony*, which gives us the most authoritative account of the most central myth for Athenian civic identity: the Battle of Gods and Giants, which occasions the birth of their patron goddess Athena from Zeus's forehead (fully armed and ready to fight). This event was commemorated in the peplos or garment that was laboriously woven from scratch to clothe a statue of Athena at every Panathenaic festival. And Socrates proposed that his interlocutors—Timaeus, Critias (who is cut off mid-stream), and Hermogenes (who never gets to speak)—do the work of replacing that foundational myth by means of the same sort of extended relay performances that rhapsodes did at the Panathenaic festival.

Again and again in our discussions, we returned to the festival—for instance, to the peplos, which provides the pervasive imagery of weaving in Plato, or to the ship of Theseus, whose departure in anticipation of the festival is what winds up delaying Socrates' death sentence. Both practices, in their different ways, seem to point toward something like the theory of forms. The peplos is materially new each year, but is also supposed to be somehow perennially “the same,” and the ship of Theseus was well-known as a logic puzzle: if it had been repaired so many times over the decades and centuries that every single material piece of it had been replaced, was it still “the same”?

With this context in mind, the theory of forms seems to grow directly out of Athenian ritual practices—and that makes sense because, as Dr. Nagy said repeatedly, Plato likely could

not imagine a world in which the Panathenaic Festival did not continue to happen every year without fail. He could be such a sharp critic of Athenian society because he was convinced that it would always endure. Yet from another perspective, his very practice of critique, his creative reweaving of Athenian myth and culture, could be read as a way of guaranteeing an eternal future for Athens. The Academy famously excluded any who did not know geometry, but the dialogues themselves much more thoroughly exclude anyone who does not know Athens—by writing it so inextricably into his dialogues, Plato ensured that Athenian culture would be continually brought back to life through the practice of philosophy.

Yet even if Plato could not imagine the end of the Panathenaic Festival, he was well aware that the Athens he was preserving was already in some sense a thing of the past. This fact is directly inscribed into his dialogues, which are themselves a lovingly detailed account of the generation that came before him—somewhat equivalent to Matthew Weiner’s painstaking recreation of the world of his parents’ generation in *Mad Men*. But whereas *Mad Men* documents a time of optimism and prosperity, Socrates’ generation lived in a shattered world. The loss of the Peloponnesian War and the ensuing civil war, which ushered in the notorious reign of the Thirty Tyrants, represented a shockingly rapid downfall for a city that had previously seemed the clear hegemon of the Greek world. In such a time of social crisis and economic distress, it is easy to understand how some would develop a grudge against an unproductive layabout who refuses to participate in his civic duties and spends all his time systematically undercutting all sources of social authority and legitimacy. At the same time, one could see how that same gadfly—or at least one of his followers—might think that a social order that had just collapsed in an arguably self-inflicted disaster may need reform.

In that context, though, it is not clear what is achieved by Socrates' death, nor why Socrates should apparently court death (through his intentionally self-undermining performance in the *Apology*) and then refuse to flee from it (as shown in the *Crito*). And here we come to one of the most surprising ideas from the seminar: Dr. Nagy's claim that Plato is trying to set up Socrates as the object of a hero cult. While the gods obviously get more press, there were in fact cultic practices devoted to the various heroes such as Theseus or Achilles, and Dr. Nagy argues—in fine-grained ways that I cannot begin to replicate here—both that the Platonic dialogues bear concrete echoes of those cultic practices *and* that there is documentary evidence of something like a hero cult for Socrates in the later practice of the Academy. In other words, the Platonic corpus is reweaving Homer in such a way as to create a character who will later come to rival the Homeric heroes as an object of cultic devotion.

Toward the end of the seminar, I began asking about the point of this complex literary operation. Clearly Plato wasn't doing it *solely* because he happened to like Socrates and wanted him to be remembered as a hero—he had broader ambitions, toward which the Socratic hero cult was a means, not an end in itself. Plato is clearly trying to transform the Greek conception of politics. To understand that transformation, I rely on the work of the French classical scholar Nicole Loraux. In *The Divided City*—which Shimer students studied this year in our senior capstone—she attempts a kind of psychoanalysis of Athens, revealing that beneath the surface rhetoric of consensus and peace, there is a repressed recognition that the Athenian political order is driven by constant conflict and therefore always in danger of sliding into civil war. Democracy is not a solution to this conflict but an institutionalization of it, and Athenians viewed every close vote of the assembly as a frightening division of the city, the first step toward the very civil war the political order was supposed to foreclose.

This, I would suggest, is what is really at stake in Plato's critique of democracy, and in his vision of a society in which everyone could be happy in their assigned role rather than constantly jockeying for position and striving for honor. In the Platonic city, conflict and competition would be redirected from elections and lawsuits into philosophical dialogue—an activity that unites the competitors in the pursuit of a shared goal rather than setting them against each other. The pursuit of knowledge would replace the pursuit of power and wealth, which leads inevitably to conflict and self-destruction. This is a version of Nietzsche's thesis in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he claims that the Socratic alternative to the tragic worldview was the only thing that saved ancient Greek culture from incurable despair and even mass suicide, but shifted into a social-political key in contrast to Nietzsche's more individualistic focus.

Of course, in Plato the individual and the political cannot be separated—*The Republic* is a treatise on both the city and the soul, neither of which can exist in harmony while the other is disordered. And this produces the bootstrapping problem that afflicts all attempts at political revolution: to build a new kind of social world, you need individuals who somehow already *are* what that social world promises to make them into. Good laws produce good individuals, but you need good individuals to produce (and assent to) good laws. Broadly speaking, it seems that Plato chose to attack the individual end of this paradox, and that means that his alternative politics always risks shifting into an alternative *to* politics—an attitude of self-cultivation among a self-selecting elite that leaves the political order to rot. To the extent that we academics (whose profession literally takes its name from the institution Plato founded) envision ourselves as part of that elite, that choice does have a certain appeal. Yet looking at the world around us, I think we can see the danger in leaving the political order to rot, in giving up in advance the notion that politics should have anything to do with the good, the true, or the beautiful.

And this brings me back to the relationship between Plato and Christianity, which Nietzsche once called “Platonism for the People.” Especially after doing this intensive study, I do have more of a sense of the elective affinity between Platonism and Christianity. Paul, too, is starting from the individual end of the problem of producing justice, by forming small collectives who practice a new kind of social life that stands in contrast to the injustice and oppression of Empire—or at least that’s the reading of Paul I have tried to foist on my students by assigning Ted Jennings’ *Outlaw Justice: The Messianic Politics of Paul* as their primary window onto the Pauline project.

Paul is of course relying on the literal *deus ex machina* of God to take care of the larger-scale end of the problem through apocalyptic destruction and rebirth of a decadent human community. Plato does not have access to that mechanism, but until that blessed event occurs (and we’re still waiting!), the day-to-day consequences of Plato and Paul’s teachings may be broadly similar. More than that, early Christians—or at least those who would be retrospectively remembered as the precursors of orthodoxy—were aiming at something like the equanimity in the face of death that Platonic philosophy aimed to cultivate. Indeed, many early Church Fathers boasted that whereas philosophy struggled to produce this attitude to death in the elites, Christianity could attain it even for women and slaves. Hence it is understandable that Western Christianity, as shaped by the great Platonist Augustine, could envision itself as a minority community cultivating individual piety while maintaining a certain indifference to the vagaries of the political world—in short, the Church could become something like a less elitist (or maybe just differently elitist) version of Plato’s Academy.

It did not work out quite like Augustine planned—rather than simply making use of the peace of Babylon, the Church ultimately contributed to war and strife, to the point that one of the

foundational myths of the modern secular political order is that religion is always and everywhere a source of violence. What went wrong? I'm not entirely sure, but I think I know what Plato would say, and it's basically the same thing Martin Luther said 500 years ago: the church became decadent and worldly.

That answer may be right or wrong, but in this context, it's mainly an excuse to jump from broad world-historical claims to a single small detail in the *Republic*: namely, a couch. In Book 10, when Socrates is detailing how poetry is a copy of a copy, his example of a form is a couch, and teachers of Plato's theory of forms have often been drawn to similar furniture-based metaphors (tables, lecterns, etc.). When we discussed Book 10 in the seminar, I was among the participants tasked with coming up with some framing questions, and I asked: why precisely a couch? Doesn't that feel like a weird example of a form, when Plato is most often after justice, or beauty, or something like that?

I thought it was a minor question, but the result was probably one of the best and most energetic discussions of the entire week, as everyone threw themselves into the all-important couch question. From Dr. Nagy's imposing command of the Greek corpus, we learned that the word, *klinē*, is the same that refers to the chaise-lounge-like chairs characteristic of symposia, and that after Socrates detailed the first draft of his city—where everyone would live a life of militarized monasticism—Glaucon asked for luxuries that would have been typical of a symposium setting. And unlike the first draft, the city with luxuries ultimately proves unsustainable in Socrates' view, as the complex system of selective breeding is bound to fail in the long run.

Thus Socrates may be goading Glaucon—remember those couches you asked for?—and Glaucon is just happily nodding along, oblivious to the fact that his demand for luxury has

already destroyed the city in advance. I suggest that the reader is supposed to recognize the incongruity of using the “wrong” example of a form in precisely the culminating book of Plato’s magnum opus, but we all nod along as well, misleading our students from the true path of knowledge by directing their attention to furniture rather than the form of justice.

Yet on another level, we *should* be directing their attention toward furniture by asking things like “why a couch?” That is my first pedagogical lesson from the seminar: the text matters. Treating the text as a mere vehicle for a series of arguments is a mistake and winds up reducing Plato to the aforementioned vaguely important figure who is advancing ideas we can’t possibly ask our students to embrace. In other words, to understand the philosophy of the man who wanted to expel literature from his ideal city, we have to read that philosophy *as literature*.

Secondly, context matters: not just the literary context of the Platonic corpus, but the broader literary culture that Plato is transforming from the inside out. The amount of reading we did in the seminar is probably impractical for most undergrad classes, but a little can go a long way—even if you don’t spend a lot of class time on the background materials, as our seminar mostly did not. For instance, it would be a simple matter to assign a few discourses of Lysias alongside the *Apology* or the *Phaedrus*, and just spending a few minutes gathering observations of these short and very readable texts would likely pay huge dividends in contextualizing the dialogues.

This is an especially important insight for us at Shimer, where we have long recognized the need for more contextual information but don’t know quite how to deliver it—lecturing for any length of time would undercut the atmosphere of open dialogue we have fought so hard to create, and assigning secondary historical texts feels like a “wasted” reading insofar as students

don't find such materials very discussable. The experience of the seminar suggests that the problem of context can be partly ameliorated through our primary source method.

Ultimately, though, if we want our students to really understand what Plato is up to, particularly in *The Republic*, they need to understand deeply what Homer is up to and they need to get a sense of the rise and decline of Athens via a text like Thucydides. By treating it as an abstract thought experiment or as one classic text of Western political philosophy among others, we rob it of its subversive power and bold ambition. We probably can't expect our students to sign up for the details of Plato's agenda, but I think they would be attracted to his basic gesture—if we can attend to text and context in a way that renders Plato's abstractions concrete.