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PLATO'S PHAEDO: TRAGEDY, PHILOSOPHY, AND BACKSTABBING

Melody Wilson

Once a thing is committed to writing it circulates equally among those who understand the subject and those who have no business with it; a writing cannot distinguish between suitable and unsuitable readers. (Socrates, Phaedrus 275c.)

Although he wrote poetry and tragedies as a youth, upon joining Socrates Plato burned all of his manuscripts (Lesky, 507). As a philosopher, Plato can be made to say that the written word could convey the depth of meaning necessary to the understanding of the subject of philosophy. Perhaps in response to the assertions of contemporary philosophers, Plato asserted that, "no treatise by me concerning [philosophy] exists or ever will exist" (Cushman, 304). He did ultimately write, but using a form that did not violate this principle. In the dialogue, Plato replicates the natural conversation which would have occurred in the philosophical discussions he constructs. In addition, the presence of contemporary individuals allows him the opportunity to endow his interlocutors with meaning beyond their words.

We must, therefore, avoid reading the dialogues as philosophical gospel. If Plato's assertion is valid, then it can be argued that they are not intended to reflect the ultimate

truth of Plato's theories. He does discuss his theories within the dialogues, but there are manifold other forces at work within each, many not of a philosophical nature.

The night before he met Plato Socrates dreamed that a cygnet settled in his lap and, developing at once into a full-fledged swan, flew forth into the open sky uttering a song which charmed all hearers. (Riginos, 21)

Just before his death Plato saw in a dream that he became a swan and, leaping from tree to tree, he frustrated the attempts of the bird-catchers to try to hunt him down. (Riginos, 24)

Plato is called: 'the child begotten by Apollo' (Riginos, 11).

I believe that the swans, belonging as they do to Apollo, have prophetic powers and sing because they know the good things that await them in the unseen world... (Socrates, *Phaedo*, 85b)

Plato's intentional connection of his mythical father, Apollo, with the swan of Socrates' dream effectively empowers him to "act" on behalf of Socrates. Plato uses this power to increase the authority with which he asserts his own theories from the literary-mouth of Socrates.

The *Phaedo*, the final instalment in the trilogy of dialogues dealing with Socrates' trial and death, shines with adulation for the author's master. Plato's utilization of the sacred ship's return from Delos, a return which inferentially marks the death of an aged man, traditionally King Aegeus, establishes Socrates as Plato's "King of Athens." The eulogy given by Phaedo after Socrates' death leaves no doubt as to the light in which Plato intended Socrates to be seen by his readers. Plato's Socrates is idealized. Who, however, was Plato's Socrates?

The *Phaedo* is defined as a late-middle-dialogue in the chronological order compiled by scholars who have attempted to organize the dialogues. Additionally, there are a number of dialogues between the other members of the trial/death trilogy and the *Phaedo*, representing a substantial amount of time (Ross, 2). During the years intervening between Socrates' execution and the writing of the

Phaedo, Plato's memory of Socrates would have been altered and his philosophy would necessarily have been assimilated into Plato's own. Thus, in a dialogue as late as the *Phaedo*, Socrates must be seen as a facade for Plato. Rather than a tribute, though tribute is paid to Socrates, the *Phaedo* should be viewed as a vehicle for Plato's own philosophical and personal goals.

The *Phaedo* was constructed in such a way that it can be read on a number of levels. Superficially it can be read as a tribute to and history of Socrates' last hours. On another level, Plato juxtaposes the themes of Socrates' death as a tragedy and the battle between the soul and the body, with both themes moving in opposite linear directions. Within this level, Socrates is forced to defend the complacency with which he faces his death and the abandonment of his pupils. He does this with a series of exhibits, exhibits which serve to illustrate Plato's theories as well as to support Socrates' attitude. Interwoven throughout are allusions to the corpus of Greek literary knowledge intended to give insight to the original reader. At the center, Plato gives a commentary on his society and colleagues.

The narrative frame for the *Phaedo* is a relation of the events of Socrates' last hours by Phaedo to Echecrates. Echecrates, a Pythagorean from Phlius, claims not to have had access to information about Socrates' trial and death because few people travelled from Phlius to Athens at that time (Gouldner, 368). Echecrates justifies the writing of the dialogue, presumably against Plato's own better judgment, by assuring Phaedo that his "audience" is very interested and implores him to "describe every detail as carefully as you can." Plato's literary decision to have Echecrates assure him of an interested audience must refer not only to Echecrates, but also to the reader for whom the document was written. Echecrates' request that the details be told carefully can be seen as an assurance by Plato that his depiction will be accurate.

As though beginning an epic, Phaedo gives Echecrates a catalogue of those present during Socrates' last day. He begins by deriding Apollodorus' behavior, then lists the "local people" in attendance. Interestingly, Plato chooses not to list Crito individually, but rather infers that he is there as Critobulus' father. Echecrates asks whether

there were any “outsiders” present, an interesting question; being one himself. *Phaedo* lists Simmias and Cebes, the two most active participants of the *Phaedo*, with the exception of Socrates, as outsiders. *Phaedo* also finds it necessary to inform Echecrates that Aristippus and Cleombrotus did not attend, suggesting that they were “probably” in Aegina at the time. Aegina and Athens were traditionally at odds (Riginos, 34). In addition, Plato was kidnapped and offered for sale as a slave at Aegina (Diogones Laertius, iii, 19). It can be surmised therefore, that although softened by the “probably,” Plato intended for Aristippus and Cleombrotus to be derided for their absence at such a crucial time.

The historical narration of Socrates’ last hours begins as Crito has Xanthippe, Socrates’ wife, removed from the cell. This is the first of several custodial acts performed by Crito who periodically reasserts the reality of the situation by interrupting the philosophical discourse with “updates” about Socrates’ status.

Inspired by the question of the poet Evenus, as related by Cebes, Socrates relates a recurrent dream that has implored him to “practice and cultivate the arts.” Because he had previously considered philosophy to be the “greatest of the arts,” he had not felt it necessary to explore any others. Having been granted some time by the departure of Theseus’ ship, however, he felt it “safer not to take [his] departure before [he] had cleared [his] conscience by writing poetry and so obeying the dream.” This passage, for the modern reader, is the first indication within this dialogue of the conviction with which ancient people followed dreams and oracles. For a contemporary reader, however, that knowledge would be a given. The passage for Plato, therefore, might serve to express Socrates’ concern that all be in order before his death, and may cast a shadow over his confidence in his immortality. Plato, having been “profoundly influenced” by Pythagorean theories (Collinson, 10), may have utilized this difficulty to pose his own questioning as to the immortality of the soul. The immortality of the soul becomes the topic of conversation, a fitting one, as Socrates claims as, “What else can one do in the time before sunset?” Using a microcosm/macrocosm relation, “the time before sunset” can be expanded to include the span of a man’s life. This

statement then can be considered as a justification to spend one's life in the contemplation of things ethereal, and foreshadows Socrates' later assertion that a philosopher spends his life in anticipation of death.

In a discussion of particular importance to Phaedo, Socrates, Simmias, and Cebes discuss suicide as the theft of one's soul from one's masters. Socrates tells a mini-myth in which men are "in a sort of guard post, from which one must not release oneself." Socrates' suicide, however, is compelled by God, and he therefore, is released from the responsibility to remain. Simmias and Cebes, however, are not satisfied with Socrates' complacency and it becomes necessary for him to defend his position. He agrees to stage a defense, naming Simmias and Cebes as his jurors. The defense takes the form of a series of exhibits, exhibits which reflect Plato's philosophical theories. The exhibits encompass the didactic information Plato has chosen to convey in the *Phaedo*.

At this point, Crito re-enters the conversation to ask that Socrates be still in order to ease his departure, as suggested by the jailer. His appearance moves the dialogue forward by reminding us that time is passing and introduces the jailer as compassionate.

Interwoven throughout the text are the tragedy of Socrates and an "anti-tragedy," being the war between the body and the soul. Early in the dialogue, when Socrates' chains are removed, he remarks on the pleasure and pain caused by their removal. If the chains are extended to symbolically hold him to earth, as they have in fact done since the departure of the sacred ship, their removal signifies both Socrates' freedom and his condemnation. He experiences the pain of leaving the life he has established with his students and the anticipated pleasure of a death he professes to have prepared for through philosophy.

Socrates' tragedy possesses the unities of time, place and action. The action takes place between sunrise and sunset of a single day, remains in one location, and does not change substantially in tone. The parallel anti-tragedy of the war between the body and the soul takes place within the same confines, but, as stated above, can be expanded to include the philosopher's entire life.

As an individual considered to be superior to the normal man, yet inferior to the gods, Socrates approaches the tragic hero. His hamartia, for purposes of the tragedy, is the confidence he has in his theory of the immortality of the soul, a confidence which might be defined as hubris. Because of this confidence, though Socrates was given the chance to flee Athens rather than stand trial, and also to escape after the trial, he has chosen to remain.

As an exhibit presented in his defense, Socrates asks Simmias whether he believes that a philosopher endeavors to separate the body and the soul, and further, whether the body is a hindrance to knowledge. This juxtaposition of the body and the soul gives rise to the war between the two aspects of man. Through a series of such exhibits, Socrates and Simmias conclude that it is necessary for a philosopher to purify his soul by denying his body in order to attain "truth and clear thinking" (66b).

Socrates' language throughout the dialogue is gentle, the interlocutors politely retracting one another's statements when necessary. Recurring exhibits for Socrates' defense clarify the conflict between the body and soul, as when Socrates asks Simmias whether "...death [is a] freeing and separation of soul from body?" (67c) The freeing of the soul implies that the soul has been in bondage, strengthening the developing war imagery.

...Socrates dreamed that Plato became a crow, jumped onto his head, and began to peck at his bald spot and to croak. (Riginos, 54).

At the center of the dialogue is a social commentary which Plato could only have intended for his contemporary readers to understand with varying results. His choice of participants, and their actions in the dialogue often reflect his personal biases.

Phaedo, the narrator, came to Athens as a slave and, after fleeing his master was ransomed by friends, presumably within the Socratic Circle (Harpers, 673). Socrates, too, is in the process of fleeing a master, linking the two together. As Phaedo is proof that one master can be better than another, he provides a testament to Socrates'

actions. An alternative theory of Phaedo's selection is seen with the knowledge that Plato brought Phaedo to trial "on the charge that he was not a free man" (Riginos, 108). It would appear that with Plato's protagonist seeking to free himself from his master, the use of a slave as inquirer would be a contradiction. Possible light is shed, however, if one notes that Plato was heavily influenced by Pythagorean theories, which at the time did not favor immortality of the soul. Thus, Plato's choice of narrator is fraudulently free, as the disbeliever would interpret Socrates to be.

Plato seems interested in assuring his audience of his veracity. One way in which he achieves this is by having Echecrates repeatedly insist on being given a carefully detailed account. Another method is his own absence from the scene (Benjamin, xi). If Plato does not act within the dialogue, it appears, on the surface, that he cannot seek any gain by discolored the events of the dialogue.

The use of Simmias and Cebes as Socrates' interlocutors, and in fact, jurors, despite the fact that they are outsiders, is worthy of note. They were both Pythagoreans who had studied under Philolaus, and were responsible for Plato's exposure to Pythagorean theories (Ross, 162). Their placement in such a visible role may, like Phaedo, present the opinions under consideration by Plato.

Of more interest than who is present in the *Phaedo* is who is not present. Plato has chosen to absent Aristippus and Cleombrotus from the scene. This device is particularly seething, considering that Aristippus "accused Plato of lack of concern towards his master, as shown by his absence from Socrates' side at the time of the execution" (Navia, 151), so that it was Plato who was not present, and he simply felt the need to retaliate against Aristippus for having pointed it out. The colleague most mercilessly punished within the *Phaedo* is Apollodorus. Apparently, shortly after Socrates' execution, when Plato assured the members of the Socratic Circle that he (Plato) was qualified to take Socrates' place as their teacher, Apollodorus replied: "I would rather have taken the cup of poison from Socrates than a toast of wine from you" (Riginos, 101).

It would appear that Plato had difficulty getting along with many of his colleagues. An example of the esteem in which the other members

of the Socratic Circle held Plato is discernible by an anecdote about a visit Antisthenes paid to Plato during an illness. Seeing a “basin into which Plato had vomited, Antisthenes commented: ‘I see the bile in here but I do not see the pride’” (Riginos, 100). In fact, “other Socratics did not hesitate to deny any intimate relationship between [Socrates and Plato], for, as they argue, no one acquainted with Socrates would have imputed to him so many non-Socratic ideals” (Navia, 151):

The most telling anecdote dealing with the personal relationships between Plato and his colleagues is the “second” dream related by Socrates, wherein the swan he had earlier cultivated degenerates into a crow, and rather than uttering a charming song, croaks.

Socrates uses a series of allusions to illustrate the conflict while developing his defense for Simmias and Cebes. He likens the philosopher who cannot keep soul and body separate to Penelope as they carefully weave their philosophical purity only to unravel it at the next turn. Simmias, in a passage shortly after the one in which Penelope is alluded to, searches for a theory to cling to, as “a raft to ride the seas of life...assuming that we cannot make our journey ... by the surer means of a divine revelation” (85d). Feeling at this point in the dialogue as though Socrates’ theory has been refuted, Simmias feels tossed about by the sea as Odysseus was. The allusion would imply, however, that ultimately, all will be well.

Echecrates interrupts Phaedo’s narration, himself searching from something to cling to. This interruption serves to reestablish the narrative frame and allows Phaedo to discuss his own interaction with Socrates at the time. Phaedo assures Echecrates that Socrates “healed our wounds, rallied our scattered forces, and encouraged us to join him in pursuing the inquiry” (89).

Socrates, gearing up for the main assault, gathers Phaedo’s long hair, saying, “Tomorrow, I suppose, Phaedo, you will cut off this beautiful hair” (89). Phaedo responds that he will, to which Socrates responds that they should both cut their hair “today... if we let our argument die and fail to bring it to life again,” and he equates the present argument with the embarrassing loss of the Argives after which they swore to wear their hair short until their honor had been redeemed.

Phaedo expresses concern about the battle with Simmias and Cebes, who now represent the war between body and soul, saying that “not even Heracles can take on two at once” (89c), but Socrates offers himself as Phaedo’s Iolaus, and conversely, Phaedo offers to fill that role for Socrates, as the two of them reenter the battle, the scope of which has now been likened to Heracles’ battle with the Hydra in which Heracles and Iolaus cooperate to defeat the beast (Stapleton, 99).

The crux of the battle is established, as Socrates states that “my anxiety will not be to convince my audience, except incidentally, but to produce the strongest possible conviction in myself” (91b). Several exhibits are presented, meeting with varying degrees of assent, and Socrates, speaking harshly for the first time demands of Simmias: “make up your mind which theory you prefer” (92c). The war escalates, and Socrates verifies the escalation as he finds it necessary to “come to close quarters in the Homeric manner” (95b), hand-to-hand and bloody.

In a more terse tone, sounding as though he is becoming irritated, Socrates restates Cebes’ objection to the theories Socrates has presented. Once he has finished reviewing it, he clarifies that he has done so, “in order that nothing may escape us” (95e). Socrates discusses his youthful interest in the natural sciences and the ways in which they ultimately did not meet his expectations.

Socrates discusses his search for the causes of things by relating a physically oriented theory. He begins, calling it a “wonderful hope,” (98c) but says that his hopes were “quickly dashed.” This theory attributes the causation of a person being in a particular place at a particular time to the position of their relative bones and sinews at that time. As the passage moves forward, the descriptions of the theory’s unacceptable tenets come closer and closer together, culminating as Socrates says, no doubt quickly and with increasing pitch:

...adducing causes such as sound and air and hearing and a thousand others...

at which point the pace would slow to a deliberate, inflected tone:

...and never troubled to mention the real reasons, which are that since Athens has thought it better to condemn me, therefore I for my part have thought it better to sit here, and by dog, I fancy that these sinews and bones would have been in the neighborhood of Megara or Boeotia long ago—impelled by a conviction of what is best—if I did not think it better... (99).

This is the only expression of Socrates' anger at his own predicament in the *Phaedo*.

The dialogue regains composure as in his Earth Myth, Socrates discusses the end to which the various levels of souls will come. The end to which those "surpassing holiness" will come will be to be released from all bonds and to live in the aether, "without bodies." Thus, the reward for achieving the ideal life of the philosopher is "glorious and the hope great" (114c).

As the day is getting late, Socrates commends moderation to Simmias and Cebes, to ensure their journey into the next world at some later time, and says, "for me the fated hour, as a tragic character might say, calls even now" (115). Plato has had Socrates identify himself as a tragic hero.

Crito questions Socrates as to his wishes, bringing the dialogue back to the level of historical narration. Socrates, secure in the liberation of his soul, has no preference.

At this point, the war has reached its apex, and the tragedy is nearly fulfilled. The entrance of the prison officer, bringing the Hemlock, serves as a dual deus-ex-machina; both freeing the soul, and isolating the tragic hero. Socrates' catharsis occurs when he has finally overcome any trepidation, and proclaims his executioner "charming" (116c). The narrative frame is reestablished as Phaedo speaks Echecrates' name within the narration of the dialogue, without the special notation previously used, just prior to Socrates' drinking of the poison.

Having seen their master drink the draught, the attendants become emotional, particularly Apollodorus, who, according to Plato, "had never stopped crying even before" (117d). Socrates reprimands them,

presumably Apollodorus in particular, because he is firm in his belief, and they should share it. The fact that Apollodorus cries continually can be seen as a slight to him by Plato. After Socrates' historical death, Apollodorus felt strongly enough about the Socratic Vision to have preferred to join Socrates in suicide than to follow Plato. Plato thus uses this opportunity to accuse Apollodorus of not having enough belief to retain his composure through the execution within the dialogue.

Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. (118)

Socrates' last words reveal that while dying, he felt confident enough in the victory of his soul over his body to make the offering customarily made to the sacred physician upon recovering from disease.

Only Aristotle remained to listen when Plato read [the *Phaedo*], the rest of the audience departed (Riginos, 180).

This citation leads one to believe both that the *Phaedo* was doomed to a lackluster fate, and that Aristotle alone understood and appreciated it. Unfortunately, Aristotle later attacked the dialogue as being vague (Lesky, 523). The dialogue did not lack impact on individuals' lives, however, as Marcus Cato Uticensis, having decided to commit suicide, a sword in one hand, the *Phaedo* in the other, "...prepared for himself these two implements, one that he might wish to die, the other to enable to do so" (Novotny, 235). Cleombrotus, whom Plato had excluded from the dialogue, believed so strongly that the better life Socrates described existed for him that he "jump[ed] from a high wall to reach the promised second life the sooner" (Novotny, 234).

We do not know why the dialogues were written, but have historically assumed that they were written to glorify Plato's master and mentor, Socrates, and to propitiate the two philosophers' theories. In view of the fact that Plato insisted that his most important doctrines would not appear in writing, as well as the questions a careful study

of available anecdotes regarding Plato's personality gives rise to, places these accepted purposes in question. Although the anecdotes may not always be absolutely factual, there is an abundance of contemporary figures giving unflattering testimony, and a paucity of praise.

Plato possessed tremendous power in his writing. He possessed the ability to convey meaning in a multi-layered and often invisible manner. The passage of time between the writing of the *Apology* and the *Crito* and the writing of the *Phaedo* presents problems with the continuity of the three dialogues. Had Plato wanted a forum at a late date in his life, wouldn't the execution of Socrates have presented an opportunity to assure himself a broad audience? Given that the dialogue does not impart his ultimate wisdom, and given that the passage of time would have lessened the drive to sanctify Socrates' memory, Plato's purposes for the writing of the *Phaedo* are not wholly didactic.

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