

## THE DEATH OF SOCRATES

THE scene at the end of the *Phaedo*, in which Plato describes how Socrates dies by poisoning from hemlock, is moving and impressive. It gives us the sense of witnessing directly an actual event, accurately and vividly described, the death of the historical Socrates. There are, however, certain curious features in the scene, and in the effects of the hemlock on Socrates, as Plato presents them. In the *Phaedo* hemlock has only one primary effect: it produces first heaviness and then numbness in the body. The numbness begins in the lowest part of the body, the feet, and then proceeds gradually upwards, to the groin and then the heart, death occurring when the heart is affected. The only other symptom is a single movement (ἐκινήθη, 118 a 12) immediately prior to death. The symptom of numbness in the lower legs is one that we meet in other ancient accounts, for instance in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (when Dionysus and Heracles are discussing possible routes to Hades),<sup>1</sup> and in the *Alexipharmaca* of the second-century writer Nicander.<sup>2</sup> But that is only one of a number of symptoms Nicander lists. He also speaks of disturbed consciousness, rolling eyes, choking in the throat and windpipe, gasping for breath, and contracted arteries. Accounts of hemlock-poisoning in modern medical authorities recount more effects of this kind. They speak of salivation, nausea, vomiting, as well as dryness and choking in the lower throat; the pupils are dilated, the vision and hearing become imperfect, and the speech is thick. Paralysis occurs in the arms as well as the legs, and is often accompanied by spasms and convulsions.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Plato's description gives only one or two of the symptoms of hemlock-poisoning. Furthermore, the death scene in the *Phaedo* gives a quite different impression of the effects of the drug from the medical accounts. In Plato's picture, the penetration of hemlock into the body is a process of calm, almost rhythmic regularity. Contrast this with the hectic impact of the drug, as Nicander presents it: '... the eyes roll, and men roam the streets with tottering steps and crawling upon their hands; a terrible choking blocks the lower throat and the narrow passage of the windpipe; the extremities grow cold; and in the limbs the stout arteries are contracted; ... the victim draws breath like one swooning, and his spirit beholds Hades' (tr. Gow and Scholfield). Modern accounts, with their emphasis on nausea and unsteadiness of movement, give a similarly torrid picture of the physical collapse the drug induces.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> εὐθὺς γὰρ ἀποπήγνυσι τὰντικνήμια (126). Professor Fitton-Brown points out to me that artistic selectiveness (which I find in the *Phaedo*'s account) may have determined Aristophanes' choice of symptoms also. The whole section plays on comic oppositions, as Dionysus criticizes various routes to Hades: hanging is stiflingly hot (πνυγρὴν, 122), it chokes the throat, hemlock is much too cold (ψυχρὴν, 125), it freezes the legs. The choking in the throat that hemlock also induces is omitted, to sharpen the contrast with hanging.

<sup>2</sup> 186-94. Nicander: *Poems and Poetical Fragments*, ed. with tr. and notes by Gow and Scholfield (Cambridge, 1953).

<sup>3</sup> E. Dwight, *Toxicology* (Philadelphia, 1904), p. 259. R. Kobert, *Lehrbuch der Intoxication* (Stuttgart, 1906), ii, 1079-80. R. Witthaus, *Manual of Toxicology* (New York, 1911), pp. 924-5. W. McNally, *Toxicology* (Chicago, 1937), p. 517. W. F. von Oettingen, *Poisoning* (New York, 1952), p. 317.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. McNally: 'Poisonous doses produce the general symptoms of weakness, languor and drowsiness, but not actual sleep.

How should we explain this discrepancy between Plato's description, which seems to give such an accurate and detailed account of Socrates' death, and medical accounts of hemlock-poisoning?<sup>1</sup> One possible explanation might be that the kind of hemlock used by the Athenians in Socrates' day was different from that known two centuries later by Nicander, and from that used in modern experiments; or, that the dose used in Socrates' case was smaller than that in more recent cases. (The question of the amount of hemlock ground up to make the poisonous drink occurs twice in the dialogue; on the second occasion the poison-mixer explains that he prepares only as much of the drug as is needed for the fatal dose, 63 d 5-e 5, 117 b 6-9.) It is inherently unlikely that the type of hemlock used would differ between Socrates' and Nicander's time. And, if Socrates' dose were smaller, the result would surely be all the usual symptoms on a smaller scale, not a reduced number of symptoms. In fact, a poisonous dose of hemlock is likely to be roughly the same, in amount as well as kind, at all periods.

One might try to explain the unusual character of Plato's account by arguing that he describes all the symptoms that would be visible to an eyewitness. Many of the symptoms omitted are internal: the choking in the throat, impairment of senses, pain and contraction of blood-vessels and muscles. The dilation of pupils might not be perceptible in Socrates' naturally protruding eyes; in any case, we are told that Socrates covered his face (presumably with a piece of his clothing) for most of the time the drug was acting on him (118 a 6). However, Plato goes out of his way to disclose one of the internal symptoms, the numbness spreading from the lower legs. He tells how the poison-mixer pinched Socrates' feet, and then his shins, and so on, asking if he felt anything; in each case Socrates said no, thus showing how sensation was gradually leaving the body (117 e 6-118 a 2). If Plato had wished to emphasize internal symptoms other than just this one, revealing the more general collapse of the bodily functions that was actually taking place, he could have done so. Similarly, the holding up of a piece of clothing throughout much of the process would not have concealed wholly the slurring of speech, the gasping, salivation, and perhaps vomiting, that the drug induced. We have to conclude that the picture given in the *Phaedo* is not that of an observant eyewitness preserving every detail of Socrates' death. (Indeed, Plato makes it clear at the start of the dialogue that he was not himself present on this occasion, 59 b 10.) The special features of the act of dying depicted there reflect the selectiveness of the narrative, and of the author.

On what principle has Plato made his selection of symptoms: why did he

Movements are weak, slow and unsteady, and the gait is staggering. Generally there are nausea and vomiting, with profuse salivation . . . There are tremors and febrillary contractions of the muscles, with occasional convulsions.'

<sup>1</sup> This disparity is noted by John Burnet, *Plato's Phaedo*, App. 1, pp. 149-50. He finds it puzzling; and, since he presupposes that the account is historically accurate, he wonders if the drug was indeed hemlock. He is reassured on this point by 'an eminent pharmacologist, my colleague Professor C. R. Marshall', who affirms: '... Personally,

I am decidedly of opinion that his death was due to conium (i.e. hemlock-juice). It is difficult to be absolutely positive on this point, as conium is somewhat peculiar in its action, and the symptoms produced vary with the dose and probably with the individual.' This vague reply satisfied Burnet but leaves the puzzle where it was. Poisonous doses of hemlock, to judge from the toxicologies, regularly produce a number of symptoms: some of these Plato omits. That is the problem. To say 'the symptoms . . . vary . . . *probably* with the individual' (my italics) is not enough.

describe the effects of hemlock in the way he did? In minimizing the effects of the poison, Plato may have wished to show Socrates' physical toughness and stoicism, the control of his mind over his body which is also stressed in Alcibiades' speech in the *Symposium* (220 a ff.). Other men exhibited various features of physical collapse: Socrates merely covered his face except for one final ironic remark. This may very well be one motive behind Plato's description; another may have been the desire to eliminate the more unattractive results of hemlock-poisoning from his picture of Socrates' end. But the physical details Plato does give, and the way the poison-mixer, as well as Socrates, is used in the composition of the scene, can be seen as having a positive purpose, that of illustrating a major theme in the *Phaedo*: the liberation of the soul from the body.<sup>1</sup> Of the various indices of physical collapse produced by hemlock, the one isolated in the *Phaedo* is the paralysis or numbness spreading from the feet upwards into the body (not, as in some accounts, affecting other extremities like the arms).<sup>2</sup> The demonstration in which the poison-mixer pinches one part of the body after the other presents the spreading paralysis as the passing of sensation out of the body, proceeding stage by stage. The word *ψυχή*, usually translated 'soul', had a number of meanings, as the essential functions of life were variously identified.<sup>3</sup> Sensation, however, was generally seen as a property of *psyche*, particularly by the natural philosophers;<sup>4</sup> for Plato, sensation is an activity in which the *psyche* uses the body as its instrument.<sup>5</sup> Since Homer, loss of sensation, in fainting and death, had been described as *psyche* leaving the body. The gradual loss of sensation, then, would be seen as the departure of the *psyche* from the body (a process emphasized by its measured slowness)<sup>6</sup>—departure, in this case, having a special significance. The word used by the poison-mixer in explaining the point in the poisoning process at which Socrates will die is *οἴχεσθαι*, a word often used to mean 'die', but whose primary significance is 'go away' or 'leave'. A little earlier in the dialogue, Socrates makes some play with this ambiguity in *οἴχεσθαι*, stressing to Crito that, at what the others regard as death, he, that is his *psyche*, will not stay but will 'go away'.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the argument of the *Phaedo*, it is repeatedly emphasized that, in what is normally thought of as death, the *psyche* is not destroyed along with the body, but is released or purified from the body, and goes from it into independent, non-corporeal existence.<sup>8</sup> What Plato presents, I think, in the death of Socrates, is the purification of the *psyche* from the body. The *psyche* begins its journey from the physically lowest region, the feet; in Plato's account, it was when the *psyche* had passed out of a bodily region that was 'low' and 'physical' in another sense, the groin, the area of sexual lust and generation, that Socrates uncovered his face to make his last ironic remark, that he owed a cock to Asclepius, since he had now recovered

<sup>1</sup> 66 b ff., 80 d ff., 114 c.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. Witthaus.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. D. Claus, *Psyche: A Study in the Language of the Self before Plato* (diss. Yale, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> e.g. Philol. 13, Diog. Apoll. 4, cf. Arist. *de An.* 405<sup>b</sup>11.

<sup>5</sup> *Phd.* 79 c, *Tht.* 184 c ff.

<sup>6</sup> Contrast the rapidity of the exit of the Homeric *psyche*: *ψυχή δ' ἐκ ρέθρων πταμένη Αἰδώςδε βεβήκει* (*Il.* 16. 856, 22. 362),

*ψυχή δὲ κατ' οὐταμένην ὠτειλὴν ἔσσυτ' ἐπειγομένη* (*Il.* 14. 518), *ψυχή . . . πεπότηται* (*Od.* 11. 222).

<sup>7</sup> εἶπεν οὔτι, ἐπειδὴν πρὸς τῇ καρδίᾳ [ἡ ψυχρότης] γένηται αὐτῷ, τότε οἰχίσεται, 118 a 3-4. Cf. ἐπειδὴν πῖω τὸ φάρμακον, οὐκέτι ὑμῖν παραμενῶ, ἀλλ' οἰχίσομαι . . . 115 d 3-4.

<sup>8</sup> 115 d. Cf. καθαρεύωμεν [τὴν ψυχὴν] ἀπ' αὐτοῦ [sc. τοῦ σώματος] 67 a, κάθαρσις, καθαρμός 69 b-c, 84 a-b, 106 c-107 a.

from the sickness of being alive.<sup>1</sup> The soul 'gathering itself to itself' (to use a phrase from the discussion of the *Phaedo*),<sup>2</sup> comments detachedly on its release from the burdens and pressures of bodily existence.<sup>3</sup> The final movement of Socrates' body is the last index of the *psyche*'s presence, perhaps the movement of its actual departure. The quietness, the calmness, the regularity of the effects of the penetration of poison into Socrates' body (so different from the chaos, squalor, and collapse described by Nicander and modern toxicologies) is the quietness of a ritual, the *katharmos* or purification of the soul from the prison of the body. The vivid and detailed picture of this death that Plato gives is not that of a man reproducing an actual event in every particular, but of an author selecting and embellishing those features which will illuminate, in visual form, the intelligible meaning of his argument.<sup>4</sup>

This instance, in which a historical event is transformed into a representation of a philosophical idea, should alert us to the possibility that many of what seem to be authentic glimpses into the life, and death, of the historical Socrates may in fact be illustrative pictures, attached or inset, like the myths of the dialogues, into Plato's arguments.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The usual interpretation of the remark, 118 a 8-9.

<sup>2</sup> [τὴν ψυχὴν] αὐτὴν . . . εἰς αὐτὴν συλλέγεσθαι καὶ ἀθροίζεσθαι, 83 a 7-8, cf. τὸ χωρίζειν ὅτι μάλιστα ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ ἐθίσαι αὐτὴν καθ' αὐτὴν πανταχόθεν ἐκ τοῦ σώματος συναγείρεσθαι τε καὶ ἀθροίζεσθαι . . . τοῦτό γε θάνατος ὀνομάζεται . . ., 67 c 6-d 4.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Sophocles' calm pleasure at having escaped, through old age, the λυτῶντά τινα καὶ ἄγριον δεσπότην of lust, *Rep.* 329 c 4.

<sup>4</sup> It also reinforces the argument. This

measured and ordered picture encourages us to see the *psyche* as an entity separable from the body, not just the 'harmony' of the physical parts while they are all working together (85 e ff.), but the inner centre of sensation and cognition visibly separating itself from its shell.

<sup>5</sup> This article was read as a 'communication' at the Classical Association A.G.M. in Bristol, April 1972, and is summarized in the *Proceedings*, 1972. I am grateful to Professor E. A. Havelock for suggesting, in conversation, the basic idea of this article.