
Paragraphoi

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Plato and the Greek Literary Tradition

Helen H. Bacon
Barnard College

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Plato's dialogues are works of fiction that, like life itself, present characters, ideas, and events that evoke different responses in different audiences.¹ The artistry with which the dialogues do this is the source of their endless fascination

¹My lifelong preoccupation with the importance of the esthetic and literary features of Plato's work extends and expands on some of Paul Friedlander's suggestions about their crucial role in the dialogues (*Plato: An Introduction*. Trans. H. Meyerhoff. Bollingen Series 59. (New York, 1958–69), particularly vol. 1 ch. 1 and *passim* throughout the three volumes). My earlier discussions ("Socrates Crowned," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 35 (1959): 415–30, and "The Poetry of *Phaedo*," in M. Griffiths and D. J. Mastronarde, eds., *Cabinet of the Muses* (Atlanta, 1990) 147–62), and finally this 1985 APA Presidential Address that analyzes the artistic structure of the *Republic* treat some of these ideas in a more detailed and systematic way than Friedlander did in his work. Andrea Nightingale's *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1995) has independently, and more recently, broadened and extended the discussion of many aspects of these ideas. She emphasizes their philosophic implications and pays less attention than I have done to Plato's many adaptations of traditional devices of Greek literature.

for a public far wider than the public for technical philosophy. In addition to being fundamental works in the history of thought, they are the creations of a great literary artist, using all the resources of a great literary tradition. They are as much a part of *our* literary tradition as the works of Homer, Vergil, and the Greek tragedians—and, in later times, Dante, Milton, Goethe—an inspiration and model for countless literary artists in prose and verse from antiquity to the present. And to the extent that they are works of art, they are inexhaustible—having different meanings (not necessarily mutually exclusive) for different people and different periods.

That Plato is a great artist is not news. What is surprising is that the dialogues are so rarely studied *as* works of art, with the interpretive tools of literary criticism. Until this is done in a much more detailed and comprehensive way than has been done so far, an important aspect of Plato's enterprise is being neglected, and our understanding of Plato is less complete than it must always and inevitably be.

We need to apply to the dialogues more of those "forms of attention," to use Frank Kermode's phrase, which are customarily given to the work of such writers as Vergil and others who combine poetic and philosophic craft and vision. We should see Plato as he saw himself and meant others to see him—as an artist, though of course not *only* an artist. He works within a great literary tradition with the assurance of a master and exploits for his own purposes that tradition's view of the human condition, making use of its resources of myth, legend, fable, conventional scenes, situations, and stories, and such artistic devices as direct and indirect literary allusion, imagery, word play, and dramatic, thematic, and imagistic systems. One favorite device that Plato borrowed from the Greek literary tradition is the description of a work of art within a work of art, technically known as *ekphrasis*. An important part of this talk will be a demonstration of ways in which Plato uses this device.

Not that Plato's use of one or another of these devices is completely unknown and unremarked. But relatively little has been done towards achieving a detailed and comprehensive view of Plato's *practice* as an artist. Such a view, I believe, would give us a fuller sense of what Plato himself thought was the scope and purpose of the dialogues, and might lead to a better understanding of his own views about the arts, and in particular of the paradox that vexes Platonic studies—his distrust and depreciation of poetry, the very art he practices so superbly and finds necessary for the presentation of his thought. Since in his discussions of mimesis he does not explicitly consider his own special mode of mimesis, we should look to his way of making use of artistic devices in the *Republic* as a possible source of insight. I do not propose answers to these con-

troversial questions here but only to suggest an approach that if applied to a large number of dialogues might yield information on which answers could be based.

Such an approach would not be a substitute for other kinds of analysis, but a supplement and enrichment, in some cases a corrective of a too one-sided perspective. As I have already said, a literary text is inexhaustible and can therefore say different things to different people in different periods. Kermode claims that there is a “conversation” between these differing points of view “that maintains the life of a work of art from one generation to another.” Its effect “is always to make the work ... look different, to alter its internal balances, to attend to what had been thought marginal as if it must be brought closer to the center, even at the cost of losing what had hitherto seemed manifestly central.”² I am inviting scholars to investigate Plato’s dialogues by provisionally treating theory, usually considered central, as peripheral, and artistic practice, usually considered marginal, as central. Since any systematic approach limits vision by emphasizing some aspects at the expense of others, this will inevitably lead to distortion—but a distortion that will I hope correct or compensate for the distortion of the opposite approach.

Many scholars, perhaps most, now recognize that Plato’s philosophical message should be understood within the boundaries of each dialogue’s context—that the apparently non-theoretical details can in fact have a bearing on how we understand what is said. Nevertheless, scholars tend to study individual devices in isolation from Plato’s overall poetic practice and from the tradition of Greek poetry. Most Platonic scholarship still focuses on concepts isolated from their context. The work of the few scholars who have treated elements of Plato’s poetic practice as central rather than peripheral, and studied Plato’s dialogues in the context of the Greek literary tradition, though frequently listed in bibliographies, is rarely treated as significant data in discussions by other Plato scholars.

My contribution to the “conversation” about Plato as an artist will be an attempt to take the work of those few already engaged in this “conversation” one step further. Because the *Republic* contains both some of Plato’s strongest criticisms of Greek traditional poetry and wisdom and some of the richest evidence for his bid for inclusion in that tradition, it will serve as my example of ways in which not just figuratively, but in a much more literal sense than has so far been suggested, Plato presents himself as a poet, and the dialogues as poetry. In addition, I shall try, in the brief and sketchy way that this occasion permits, to show that in the *Republic* he represents the activity of the discussants as an artistic

²Frank Kermode, *Forms of Attention* (Chicago, 1985) 36.

activity whose outcome is a work of art—that the *Republic*, in addition to being a work of art in its own right, is also a description of the creation of a work of art, an extended example of the literary device (already mentioned) known as *ekphrasis*. This device overarches and subsumes many of the other devices and allusions that structure the entire action of Plato's *Republic*.

Perhaps because of its scale and scope, the deployment of traditional literary devices in the *Republic* is particularly full and exhaustive. The ways in which Plato makes the Greek literary tradition the vehicle of his ideas are so many, so various, and so pervasive that his text reads like a compressed and comprehensive summary of that tradition—a syncretistic work of art that incorporates its literary antecedents into itself and transforms them for its own purposes. Like the *Aeneid*, the *Golden Ass*, and the *Divine Comedy*, it is, in overall design and in detail, both a product and a redefinition of the tradition on which it draws.

Some of the ways in which this tradition is used and transformed in the *Republic* have been documented and explicated in varying degrees of detail—for instance, the epic/tragic view of the human condition that informs the dialogue; the formal grouping of its parts in concentric rings; the themes of heroic ordeal, of descent and return, of journey and quest, of context and victory, that structure the action; the extensive use of word play, and literary allusion, direct and indirect, of imagery, fable, myth, and flights of poetic language, that are used to vary the pace and mood and mark significant moments, crises, and turning points in the discussion.

The literary tradition is also repeatedly invoked by the use of time-honored tales, images, and type scenes. Almost every myth and fable is a recasting of such a tale, image, or scene. Plato goes out of his way to remind us of the poetic associations of the “noble lie,” the belief that reconciles citizens to their social roles—the fiction that earth bears gold, silver, bronze, and iron classes of human beings. It is “nothing new,” he says, “but a Phoenician kind of thing, something that has already happened in many places, so the poets say and lead us to believe” The phrases “nothing new” and “so the poets say” and the unmistakable parallels with the tale of the gold, silver, bronze, and iron ages in Hesiod's *Works and Days* invite us to recognize the connection with ancient poetic authority. The designation “Phoenician” and the emphasis in the subsequent discussion of brotherhood, and the debt of nurture, *tropheia*, owed to mother earth, evoke the way Aeschylus uses the legend of Thebes' founding by Cadmus, the Phoenician, in *Seven Against Thebes*. And when in book 8 Plato is describing the miscegenation between the different classes that marks the degeneration of the state from its only true form, he makes sure the poetic associa-

tions of his organization of the city will still be in our minds. In language that parallels Homer calling on the muses in *Iliad* 16 to say how first fire fell upon the ships, Socrates suggests that he and his friends call upon the muses to say how first civil strife falls upon the city. He then speaks of the guardians' loss of skill in "assaying" the members of Hesiod's four races and "those in your city, the gold, silver, bronze and iron."

The stories of Gyges and Er which begin and end the main argument of the dialogue as to who is happiest, the just or the unjust man, are, of course, contrasting variations on one of the *most* familiar of all stock tales, the *nekyia*, or journey to Hades. Gyges and Er, the types of the unjust and the just man, both make contact with the world of the dead. They return to the world of the living after acquiring a means of achieving "happiness," in the one case the worldly gratifications of the tyrant, in the other the spiritual blessedness of the philosopher, thereby marking the revolution in the understanding of the nature of happiness that takes place between the beginning and the end of the dialogue. Gyges is closer to the *nekyia* tradition in making the journey in the flesh, like Odysseus, Herakles, Orpheus, and Theseus, but farther from it in encountering not shades but a dead body from which he obtains not enlightenment but a magical ring that by making him invisible enables him to win worldly power and wealth through violence and treachery. This episode makes a fittingly materialistic parable for the materialistic idea of happiness that, at the beginning of the discussion, Thrasymachus, Glaucon, and Adeimantus in different ways represent as the received wisdom of the culture. *Er*, in the myth that closes and sums up the outcome of this discussion, leaves his *body* behind in order to visit the world of the dead in the *spirit* only, and returns with a correspondingly spiritual message about how to prepare oneself in this life for the ordeal of choice in the life to come so that one may ultimately attain eternal blessedness. His encounters with the shades of the heroic dead, however, evoke the adventures of Odysseus, Theseus, Herakles, and Orpheus, while the vision of rewards, purgations, and eternal punishments suggest later versions of the afterlife that we know about from the mystery religions and from a spoof in Aristophanes' *Frogs*. At the critical points of launching and concluding the great quest to discover who is happiest, Plato plays on this stock tale and so sets us firmly within the literary tradition.

At another critical moment, when Socrates (in book 6) is challenged by Adeimantus to prove mistaken the common view that the philosopher is useless, or worse, in public affairs, Socrates begins his lengthy explanation by developing one of the oldest and most familiar of all stock images, the ship of state. He compares the philosopher who tries to function in a degenerate gov-

ernment to a pilot, skilled in the arts of navigation, who has been forced to surrender the direction of the ship to the ignorant and quarrelsome crew.

These are just a few of the many examples of stock literary devices incorporated into the *Republic*. Many more have been commented on by scholars, at least in passing, and others, I am convinced, remain to be identified. They are part of Plato's system of reminders that his search for the totally just and totally unjust man is in some sense an artistic performance.

The importance in the *Republic* of contest as theme and image is frequently remarked on. The comparison of the totally just and totally unjust man in respect to happiness structures the argument. It is repeatedly referred to as a contest in which the just man is victor. The behavior of the discussants in the course of the argument is again and again characterized by images of contest, most frequently athletic. Sometimes the contest is between the discussants, sometimes against a *logos*, a particularly difficult opposing argument. But some of the literary connections and implications of this theme and image that pervade both the discussion and the activity of the dialogue have not, so far as I know, been recognized.

Plato presents the contest of the philosopher and the tyrant in a way that would remind his audience of still another time-honored stock tale, the legendary encounter of Solon, a citizen and statesman of democratic Athens, and Croesus, tyrant of Lydia, in Asia Minor, particularly in the version known to his readers and us through Herodotus. In this version Solon, described as a seeker after wisdom, visits the court of Croesus and is shown all the splendors of the tyrant's palaces and store rooms. Croesus then asks him to say who is the happiest man alive. Acting as judge in this impromptu happiness contest, Solon refuses to grant the tyrant even the "second prize" (the term is used twice). Croesus is humiliated when Solon names as victor, first, an obscure private citizen, Tellus the Athenian (who saw his sons reach manhood and then died fighting for his country); and second, two Argive youths, Cleobis and Biton (who achieved fame and death almost simultaneously). Solon goes on to explain his judgment by performing an elaborate computation in which he calculates that there are 26,250 days (including the intercalary months) in the seventy years of a man's life on which the unexpected can occur, and so we must "look to the end" and "call no man happy until he has died." The illusory nature of the happiness of Croesus, who seemed to himself and others to be the happiest of men, is immediately demonstrated by the providentially accidental death of Croesus' only son, at the hands of a refugee named Adrastus, to whom Croesus had granted sanctuary and purification.

The rivalry between the wise man and the tyrant, articulated through this standard tale of Solon and Croesus, is the focus of the whole of the discussion in the *Republic*. First raised by Thrasymachus in book 1, it is fully formulated in book 2 by Glaucon (of the family of Solon) in the form of the fable of the Lydian Gyges (founder of the dynasty of Croesus), who became tyrant with the help of the magical ring that enabled him to commit all manner of crimes undetected. The likelihood that this tale alludes indirectly to the story of Solon and Croesus is increased by its Herodotean style and content—the vividly narrated Near Eastern folk tale represented not as verifiable history but as what “men say.”

Glaucon’s demand in book 2 for the fullest possible comparison of the most just and most unjust man leads to the search for and, ultimately, to the discovery of justice in the state and in the soul, and of its opposite, injustice in states and souls. The discussants agree to conduct their investigation in such a way as to equip themselves to judge the rivals for happiness in this agonistic society. The images of contest, predominantly athletic, which punctuate the discussion, are a recurrent reminder that whoever prevails will win the prize for happiness. In a climactic passage in book 9 the victor is named in language that explicitly evokes victory in the Panhellenic games. Here, by acting as judges in the contest for happiness, the discussants become, as we shall see shortly, actors in the drama they have been describing. In three successive arguments, the happiness of the wise man/philosopher is shown to be most real and most complete; that of the tyrant most illusory. The philosopher is described as a triple victor in an athletic event with three “falls,” and Socrates, on hearing Glaucon’s judgment, says, “Shall we hire a herald [as in the Olympic Games], or shall I myself proclaim that the son of Ariston [Adeimantus] judged the best and most just man to be the happiest and that he [the just man] is most kingly and king over himself; and [that he judged] the basest and most unjust to be the most unhappy and that this is the most tyrannical man, most of all tyrant over himself, and then over his city?... And shall I also proclaim [that this is the case] whether or not mortals or gods know their true qualities?” As in Herodotus, the tyrant loses the contest, and the “king”/philosopher victors, like Tellus, Cleobis, and Biton, are often obscure private individuals, or worse, traduced and misrepresented as the opposite of what they are.

Again as in Herodotus, the awarding of the prize for happiness is associated with an elaborate computation, here performed by Socrates, who arrives at the number 729 to express the distance in respect of pleasure and pain between the king, that is, the philosopher, and the tyrant. Plato *may* have a complex mathematical/philosophical rationale for this computation, but certainly he intends to remind us of Solon’s computation of days and months and years in a human life.

For 729 equals the number of days and nights in a year (twice 364 and a half) and is also described as a number appropriate to the *lives* of the two types of human being to whom it refers, "if," Socrates says, "indeed days and nights and months and years are appropriate to them." Socrates, in the *Apology*, meditating on the same theme of the illusory nature of human happiness, evokes Solon's computation even more directly. For there he calculates that the amount of happiness in all the days and nights of a human life, even that of the "great king" himself (that is, of the Persian "tyrant"), is less than that of a single night of dreamless sleep.

Contest as image and theme recurs in the myth of Er, the poetic vision of the soul's vicissitudes in the afterlife with which the *Republic* ends. The contest is here played out on a cosmic plane. Eternal happiness or eternal misery will be the ultimate outcome of the soul's choices of all the lives the soul will undergo in its many incarnations. The philosopher, of course, is the supremely wise chooser, destined for blessedness; the tyrant, his opposite extreme in wisdom and in choosing, will end in eternal perdition.

When they award the prize for happiness in *this* world, the discussants enter into the contest as judges. In the myth of Er they enter into the contest not only as judges but as contestants. For the myth has made it clear that the person who can make the wisest choice of lives is one who, like the discussants, is qualified to judge between justice and injustice, between the illusion and the reality of happiness. In the sentence that ends the *Republic* Socrates makes the discussants' role as contestants as well as judges explicit by inviting them to strive for victory in the contest for *eternal* blessedness. "If," he says, "we are convinced by my arguments, we will pursue justice through understanding *so that* we may be on friendly terms with ourselves and the gods, both while we dwell here [in the world], and when [in the next world], *like victors in the games*, showered with gifts, we receive the rewards [of justice]; *and so that*, both here and in the thousand-year journey that we have described, we may fare well." Like so many other themes in Plato's dialogues, the theme of victory in the contest for happiness is quite literally incorporated into the action, as the characters become part of the drama they are describing. The argument itself, in which all the characters are engaged, is an action that can lead to victory in this contest.

This theme occurs in several other forms—as quest, as hunt, as rescue, as heroic ordeal, as artistic competition. This last, artistic competition, reinforces my argument that Plato offers the *Republic* and other dialogues as a challenge to the poets. They demonstrate not only *what* to praise and with what means (the matters in which the guardians lay down the rules for the poets), but also *how* to praise. There is no suggestion that the guardians will illustrate their instructions

by acquiring and practicing the craft of the poets or of any other artists. Within the dialogues, not only the *Republic* but many others, Socrates, or some other principal speaker, to a limited extent, does just this for the other participants. But it is *Plato*, rather than Socrates, who provides the most comprehensive illustrations of the correct practice of the poet's craft. Plato, who speaks with the voices of *all* the speakers (his own voice is never explicitly heard in the dialogues), is the creator of the overall poetic form. This aspect of the dialogues deserves more detailed study.

In the *Republic* the many suggestions that the participants are engaged in some sort of artistic activity as they compete for the prize of happiness help to direct our attention to the artistic activity of Plato himself. No matter who the speaker, the great succession of images, myths, and fables and the overall drama of shared discovery that are such a memorable aspect of the *Republic*, are all *his* creations—demonstrations of *his* skill in using the *craft* of the poets in the service of philosophy.

Like the contest for happiness, the arts (visual, verbal, and musical), which, in the Greek world usually involve an element of competition, are both a major topic of discussion and a way of characterizing what the discussants are doing. Beginning in book 1 with the first questionings of their versions of the nature of justice, poets as misrepresenters of reality pervade the whole text. The extended discussions of the role of the poets in connection with the city coming into being in books 2 and 3 and with the decay of cities and souls in book 10 are an important part of the dialogue's great system of symmetries. They frame the main discussion and are framed in turn by the introduction and conclusion. There is no subject, Socrates insisted, to which the guardians will give closer attention than *mousikê*, since the well-being and very existence of the state depends on its sound connection with reality. We should understand *mousikê* here in *all* its applications, from the material products of poets, sculptors, painters, and musicians to the rarified “song,” which (according to Socrates in book 6) dialectic *performs* after a prelude that consists of the correct study of mathematics, music, and astronomy. In the *Republic* and elsewhere *mousikê* as artistic practice, particularly in the visual arts, is a frequent metaphor for the work of the philosopher. Again in book 6 Socrates describes the ideal state coming into being under the jurisdiction of the muse of philosophy, while the true philosopher practices his own version of mimesis. Contemplating the eternal order, like a skilled craftsman of public excellence, he “molds” not only himself but also the characters of the citizens, individually and collectively.

This metaphor, with its thematic use of the verb that means to mold, occasionally substitutes words that suggest painting rather than sculpture. It is re-

peatedly used to characterize the activity of the discussants. The reader is not allowed to forget that in addition to the athletic contest, the discussants are engaged in some kind of artistic contest. I have time only to show how one group of references to the activity of sculptors and painters appears as a structuring element of their competition and its aftermath. The work of discovering the completely just man that is accomplished in books 2 through 7 begins when *Socrates* congratulates *Glaucon* on the vigorous way he has applied the finishing touches to his initial description of the most just and most unjust man, "as if they were statues" being presented for judgment. This work ends with *Glaucon* congratulating *Socrates* on having so fully portrayed his very excellent rulers, "as if he were a sculptor." In book 4 *Socrates* describes what they are doing as *molding* the city and painting it like a statue with colors that are true to life. Later on, in book 5, he again speaks of *molding* the city, and also in book 5, he compares the creation in speech of a model of the ideal state to the work of a painter painting a model of the most beautiful man. Finally and most graphically (in book 9)—immediately after the prize has been awarded for the triple victory in the happiness contest, and the computation made of the number that describes the distance of the just from the unjust in respect to pleasure and pain—*Socrates* proposes that they should address the one who said injustice pays (i.e., *Thrasymachus*) by *molding* an image, so that he (*Thrasymachus*) may understand what sort of thing he has said. With a series of concrete imperatives, he instructs *Glaucon* to *mold* an image of a threefold soul. This will consist of a many-headed beast, a lion, and a man, all three enclosed in the likeness of a man. And *Glaucon* verbally complies. *Glaucon's* threefold model will demonstrate that the unjust man will nourish and make dominant the many-headed beast in himself; whereas the just man will cherish and make the *man* in his soul dominant and train the *lion* to assist him. We have here a special form of the familiar device of *ekphrasis*, not just the description but the creation of a work of art within a work of art, a kind of animated *ekphrasis*, like Homer's account of Hephaestus creating the shield of Achilles. Like the weapons for Achilles' final duel with Hector, the weapon (I use the word advisedly) for *Socrates'* final man-to-man combat is only now to hand. It is the product of the skill in the construction of images jointly gained in the arduous course of the discussion. It is also a sign of how far the discussants have come that *Glaucon*, who launched the discussion with the tale of Gyges (with its misleading representation of the rewards of injustice), is now able, under *Socrates'* instruction, to forge an image that will be the basis for demonstrating the true effect of injustice on the soul.

Less graphically the activity of the participants is also linked with the verbal arts by the repeated reminder that they are creating an image of state and soul in speech. It is through these devices and many more like them that Plato makes

the whole *Republic* one great act of animated *ekphrasis*, a representation of the creation of a work of art, an image of the most perfect and most imperfect city and man, within a work of art—namely his dialogue.

Again in book 5 the problem of dealing with objections to the three basic rules of the guardian order—equality of women, community property, and the philosopher as ruler—are described, I believe, in terms of the verbal arts. Having fallen into a sea of difficulty, the discussants must keep swimming, says Socrates, and “try to be saved by the *logos*,” hoping for some dolphin or other improbable means of salvation to take them up. The art of the *logos* will provide a rescuer for the discussants drowning in waves of mockery, just as the poet Arion’s art brought the dolphin to his rescue when the pirates threw him overboard. The *logos* will enable them to escape from the ridicule of the ignorant, through their understanding that only fools make fun of anything but folly and evil, or take seriously any kind of beauty except that which is measured by the standard of the good. In language strongly evocative of the ancient poet’s traditional functions of praising and blaming (that is, articulating and transmitting the city’s moral values), we learn that knowing what to laugh at and what to take seriously involves knowledge of the good.

At the end of the myth of Er (which itself ends the *Republic*), it is again the art of the word, as *muthos* (tale) this time, rather than *logos* (argument), which, in being saved for posterity, can save us if we can grasp and act on its message about the nature of the good. In book 6 the water imagery of book 5 is even more explicitly associated with the poet’s art of praising and blaming. Describing the almost inevitable corruption of philosophic souls by their experience of public gatherings (such as assemblies, courts, *theaters*, and camps), Socrates asks what conditioning could resist and “not be swept away down the stream, swamped by such *blame* and *praise* ... and agree with these [the public] as to what is shameful and noble, and behave like them and be like them?” Here the poets in the theater are lumped with the rhetoricians of the assemblies, courts, and camps who succeed by voicing the values of the general public. The poets are excluded from the city because, like the others with whom they are here grouped, they praise the wrong things, and to make matters worse, they do it with almost irresistible enchantment. The only forms of poetry that are allowed to remain are “hymns to the gods and encomia of good men”—praise poetry of what is truly praiseworthy.

In insisting on the ethical function of praise poetry, Plato is again reflecting a traditional literary position—a tradition known to us from Pindar’s odes celebrating victors in the Panhellenic games. The *Republic* is an example on a grand scale of such a poetic act of praise, using all the devices of the Greek literary

tradition to praise the victory of justice and the just man in the contest for happiness in this world and the next, and to consign injustice and the unjust man to deserved obscurity. As in a Pindaric ode, what happens *within* the dialogue is secondary to its impact on the audience or reader of the dialogue. It is designed to inspire the audience to emulation, by illuminating the meaning of that victory; and, I feel fairly certain, it also resembles a Pindaric ode in being designed to win recognition for the poet who does this with such faithfulness to both art *and* truth.