

## THE POETRY OF *PHAEDO*\*

Helen H. Bacon  
*Barnard College*



What we think of as the “literary” dimension of Plato’s dialogues, the drama and poetry, has traditionally been dismissed by more technically oriented critics as philosophically irrelevant “interludes.” A growing number of scholars, however, are arguing that the neglect of this dimension leads to distortion and misinterpretation. Their work is giving us a more accurate and sophisticated understanding of individual dialogues, of the dialogue form, and of the scope and richness of Plato’s view of the philosophical enterprise. They have tended to concentrate on the dialogues as *dramas* in the root sense of the Greek word, events, actions, in which what is said, *ta lechthenta*, must be seen in the light of what is done, *ta prachthenta*, and to indicate the way concepts, themes, images, myths, personalities, acts, contribute to these dramas.<sup>1</sup>

Though it too is an inseparable part of the way these dramas affect us, less detailed attention has been paid to the poetry *as poetry*, to the dialogues as aesthetic forms that draw on the Greek poetic tradition and on the connotative, rhythmic, and melodic resources of language to give a specific mood, tone, and quality of emotion to the matter of the dialogues, “what is said and what is done.” This essay attempts a closer study of this relatively unexamined aspect of Plato’s art in *Phaedo*. Necessarily it also considers the dramatic dimension since the two are inseparable aspects of that art. Focusing on a few literary, primarily linguistic devices that determine the tone and give prominence to certain themes and figures of speech, it provides additional confirmation of the now generally acknowledged fact that the dramatic and poetic passages modify in many complex ways how we evaluate the concepts that are articulated in the so-called technical, philosophical passages. Conversely, it offers evidence of the less frequently observed fact that these technical, philosophical passages are, through various artistic devices, charged with the emotions and attitudes that color the dramatic and poetic passages. This suggests that the traditional distinction between “literary” and philosophical passages is artificial.<sup>2</sup> It also raises additional doubts about the view, fostered by this distinction, that Plato’s Socrates advocates and exemplifies a cool detachment from natural human emotions bound up in flesh and blood individuals.<sup>3</sup>

The plan of the dialogue, its overall artistic form, is one important means of effecting this coalescence of literary and philosophical elements. The series of discussions about immortality which make up the main body of *Phaedo* are

enclosed in an inner and an outer frame. The inner frame, the scene in the prison in Athens on the day of Socrates' death, separates and occasionally [148]breaks in on the discussions. In contrast the outer frame, the conversation of Phaedo and Echecrates in Phlius some time after Socrates' death, appears more rarely and briefly but at strategically crucial points—at the beginning, at two crucial moments in the discussion, and in the final sentence.

The opening exchange between Phaedo and Echecrates serves as an introduction to the whole dialogue by establishing a certain tone, both for the scene in Phlius and the scene in Athens, and by indicating time and place, naming the actors and announcing the major themes and figures of speech of the dialogue. After this exchange the recurrence of the vocatives *ô Phaidôn*, *ô Echekrates* is enough to indicate a return to this outer frame.

The inner frame's first appearance, which immediately follows, reinforces the effect of the first introduction by mirroring its tone and themes. It serves as a second introduction, setting the stage for the drama that takes place in the prison and launching the discussion.

The two frames perform contrasting structural functions. The inner frame articulates the whole course of the discussions, recurring with rhythmic regularity at greater or less length at the end of each section, and providing a transition to the next one. And it brings the drama in Athens to a close with the death scene. The outer frame, recurring rarely and unexpectedly, provides a kind of emphasis that intensifies by doubling the emotional impact of three critical moments—the climax of the crisis of fear and confusion (88c) after Simmias and Cebes have presented their counterarguments using the analogies of the lyre and the loom; Simmias' and Cebes' strong assent to Socrates' exposition of the method of hypothesis towards which all the discussions have been tending and on which the final crucial demonstration depends (102a2-10); and the moment when Crito closes Socrates' eyes and mouth. Here Plato, in his final sentence, with the single phrase, *ô Echekrates* (118a15), removes us from the prison in Athens to the streets of Phlius to end the dialogue where we began it.

The tension between the two framing scenes, the encounter of Phaedo and the shadowy Echecrates in the vaguely suggested streets of Phlius in the "present" and the vividly particularized people and prison interior in Athens in the past, establishes and maintains a paradoxical sense of simultaneous nearness and distance. The inner frame recurs regularly enough to keep us aware of where the discussions are taking place and who is speaking, but the outer frame disappears completely from our consciousness for long stretches of time so that the unexpected intrusion of *ô Phaidôn* or *ô Echekrates* has the effect of shocking us into awareness of where we "really" are and whose voice we are hearing (Phaedo's voice is heard in the prison only once, 89b-90d). The breaking of the spell of the drama in the prison heightens its impact, by making us aware of the power of the narrative temporarily to obliterate time and space and the everyday present in Phlius. The greater immediacy and reality of the scene in the prison almost overpower the shadowy present, making the near in

time seem far and the far near. In alternating between Phlius and Athens the reader experiences directly the psychological phenomenon on which the demonstration of immortality depends—the temporary coming to life of the memory of a more intense reality. This paradox of nearness and distance is also played out in the [149]discussions, which on all levels, technical/philosophical, dramatic, poetic, describe and act out humanity’s alternate vivid but partial glimpses of and loss of contact with the sphere of ideas. Like the fish of the myth that glimpse the real world when they leap out of the water but then fall back into the medium that distorts their vision (109a9-110b2), Socrates’ friends repeatedly agree that the soul belongs to the sphere of the ideas whose indestructibility they find unquestionable. But after each demonstration they raise an objection which tacitly treats the soul as belonging to corruptible, perishable matter. Like the memory of Socrates, the memory of what they have assented to needs to be continually revived in words if they are to make it their own.<sup>4</sup>

By various poetic means Plato infuses *Phaedo* with a tone of reverence and awe. Established in the first introduction by certain linguistic devices and allusions to ritual, this tone is reaffirmed in the second introduction and recurs from time to time, reaching its greatest intensity in the conclusion. In the first introduction, the tone of Echechrates’ opening question and Phaedo’s answer is solemn but at the same time extremely simple. Concrete vernacular words, with a preponderance of long syllables, make Echechrates’ opening question weighty and slow. Most solemn of all is the effect of the reiteration of *autos*, followed by *ô* and a vocative name, at the beginning of Echechrates’ question and Phaedo’s answer (57a1-4).<sup>5</sup>

ΕΧ. αὐτός, ὃ Φαίδων, παρεγένον Σωκράτει ἐκείνη τῇ  
ἡμέρῃ ἢ τὸ φάρμακον ἔπιεν ἐν τῷ δεσμωτηρίῳ, ἢ  
ἄλλου του ἤκουσας;

ΦΑΙΔ. αὐτός, ὃ Ἐχέκρατες.

Were you yourself, Phaedo, there with Socrates on that day  
on which he drank the *pharmakon* in the prison, or did you  
hear of it from some one else?

I myself, Echechrates.

The opening sentence’s visualization of Socrates in prison drinking the *pharmakon* anticipates the inner frame, the scene of the drama. Implicit in that scene is the doctrine (repeatedly evoked by the recurrent image of Socrates in prison carried by the inner frame) of the soul’s imprisonment in the body and its liberation through death, in Socrates’ case death induced by a *pharmakon*. The almost ritual explicitness of the phrase “on that day on which,” rather than a colorless “when” (Tredennick) or even an inert “on the day when” (Jowett, Lane Cooper, Bluck, Hackforth), or a breezy “on the day” (Gallop), strikes a note of reverence and awe appropriate to the uniqueness and solemnity of the occasion. The vocative phrases *ô Phaidôn*, *ô Echechrates*, recurring with refrainlike solemnity at three critical points in the dialogue, bring back this scene and this tone.

In addition to the sense of the almost religious significance of the occasion and the importance of having witnessed it in person, this simple exchange also contains the first suggestion of the paradoxical experience I have just described of being simultaneously remote from the event in time and space, and there in person. The sense of closeness, immediacy, and solemnity conveyed by the opening exchange is reestablished in the second part of this first introduction with Phaedo's explanation of the reason for the delay of the [150]execution. The explanation uses the vernacular, slightly formulaic language with occasional archaisms that is characteristic of sacramental discourse.<sup>6</sup> It is framed with the solemn ritual act of crowning the stern of the ship that will carry the sacred embassy to Delos, using the Ionic form *stephō* (rare in Attic prose except in a ritual sense) rather than the more usual *stephanoō* (58a7 and c2).<sup>7</sup> This ritual tone is intensified by references to the vow of the youths and maidens to honor Apollo annually with a sacred embassy to Delos if they should be saved (*ei sōtheien*, 58b2-3), and to the obligation of the city to observe a state of ritual purity (*kathareuein*, 58b5), throughout the period of the embassy. Above all the sacred significance of this apparently fortuitous coincidence is suggested in the single sentence which identifies the theoric ship. "This, as the Athenians say, is the ship in which Theseus, escorting to Crete the notable 'twice seven' (*tous dis hepta ekeinous*), once journeyed, and saved them and was himself saved" (*kai esōse te kai autos esōthē*, 58a10-b1). It is difficult to convey in English the hieratic tone produced by the dislocation of normal Greek word order, by the use of their traditional epithet (*dis hepta*) with all its solemn associations for the youths and maidens destined for sacrifice, and above all by the final clause, *kai esōse te kai esōthē*, in which the heaviness and repetitiousness of the sounds give climactic solemnity and importance to the idea of religious salvation implicit in the verb.<sup>8</sup> The passive *esōthē* reinforces this tone. Theseus "was saved" by some unspecified, perhaps divine, agency. Many translators overlook this—treating the passive as though it were middle, "saved himself" (e.g., Jowett, Gallop, Dorter, Tredennick, Bluck).

In the second introduction the ritual obligation to Apollo is again stressed when Cebes relays Evenus' curiosity about why Socrates has been putting into verse some tales of Aesop and a hymn to Apollo (60c8-d7). Though Socrates' message to Evenus is teasing and playful, his reasons for engaging in this unaccustomed activity—the recurrent dream urging him to "keep on making music and practicing it," the reiterated desire to acquit himself of a sacred obligation, *aphosioumenos* (60e2), *aphosiōsasthai* (61a8), in the literal ritual sense, as well as in the loftier metaphorical sense of *philosophias ousēs megistēs mousikēs* (61a4)—revive the sacramental ritual tone of the first introduction.

This sacramental note is briefly sounded at intervals in the dialogue, by implication in the many allusions to Apollo, more particularly in the imagery borrowed from the mystery religions. It appears in a more extended way in the beginning of the myth and most fully in the final scene. In the myth's description of the soul's transition from this world to the next we find the

formulaic sentence structure and extraordinarily simple vocabulary, concrete, detailed, repetitive, and still strangely vague and unspecific, characteristic of sacramental language, such as we find, for instance, in the General Confession in the *Book of Common Prayer*—“We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. *We have done those things which we ought not to have done and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done...*” Introduced by a mysterious, anonymous, authoritative voice, indicated by *legetai de houtôs, hôs*, “Thus is it told that,” the description goes on, “at *each man’s death each man’s daimon, the one that had been allotted him while he [151]lived, this one* tries to lead him to a *certain place, where it is necessary for those who have been gathered together, after pleading their cause, to proceed into Hades with that guide to whom it is enjoined to conduct those from this place (enthende) to that place (ekeise)...*” (107d5-e2).<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, the rest of the myth alternates between, and sometimes combines, scientific and poetic language. The tone of the beginning of the myth colors to some extent the way we experience these later passages. It also evokes the beginning of the dialogue and prepares us for the return in the final scene to the sacramental tone of the introductory scenes in Athens and Phlius.

This scene (115b-118a17) returns first to the inner frame, the prison in Athens, and in the last sentence, as I have already indicated, to the outer frame, the scene in Phlius. It begins with a ritual gesture, the reference to the funeral bath.<sup>10</sup> Such gestures become increasingly frequent as the scene progresses—to mention only the most obvious, Socrates’ desire to make a libation with the *pharmakon*, his prayer for a safe journey, his desire to die *en euphêmiâi*, which amounts to equating the death with a rite of sacrifice, and his final reminder to Crito. These words, in their concern for the sacredness of the literal ritual obligation to Asclepius, son of Apollo, bring back the emphasis on the ritual obligation to Apollo found in the two introductions.

The increasing frequency of ritual gestures helps to create a growing sense of religious solemnity. This is reinforced by a parallel evolution in the language of the scene. From its beginning, and in contrast to much of the myth, it employs an unadorned vernacular of down-to-earth simplicity. By noting with equal attention every most ordinary and extraordinary concrete detail of what is said and done, Plato creates the sense of a sacred event in which every least gesture, even feeling the feet and legs as the cold creeps upwards, is of momentous importance, a greatly heightened version of the sacramental tone of the two introductions. It is heightened still further by a recurrent parataxis which imparts an archaic, formulaic tone and accentuates the impression that each action, however apparently trivial, has equal weight and solemnity. This is achieved by repeatedly introducing the words or actions of the characters by *kai* followed by the article and a proper name—*kai ho Sôkratês* (116d3), *kai ho Kritôn* (116e1), *kai ho Sôkratês* (116e7), *kai ho Kritôn* (117a4), or by a personal pronoun, *kai hos* (117b3), *kai hêmeis* (117e3). This is the language of sacramental narrative. This note, delicately sounded in the two introductions and at intervals throughout the dialogue, is brought to its highest intensity in the

conclusion through narrative technique, vocabulary, and deployment of linguistic devices. Its predominance at the beginning and end diffuses its tone over the whole dialogue, creating in the reader, as in Echecrates and his friends in Phlius, a sense that *everything* that is said and done is an act of reverence and praise in honor of Apollo, who, as god of music, of healing, purification, initiation, salvation, presides over the whole dialogue from the vow of the “twice seven” to Socrates’ final instructions to Plato. The anthropomorphic figure of Apollo is of course a metaphor, but the tone established by the language that refers to the service of the god expresses an emotional reality which is at the heart of the activity of the true philosopher.

[152]Recurrent evocations of Theseus’ Cretan venture are another important means of bringing together the spheres of poetry and philosophy. This exploit, recalled in reverent, if selective, detail in the outer frame, proves to be emblematic for the whole dialogue. As at least three scholars have recently observed, the analogy between Socrates liberating his friends from their false notions about death by taking on the destructive bogey of fear and Theseus liberating his comrades from the labyrinth by taking on the monstrous minotaur makes the dialogue a dramatization of the Theseus story.<sup>11</sup> The analogy is more far-reaching than any of them suggests. Apollo (Theseus’ patron god) and the motifs of the journey of salvation, the monster to be overcome, and the labyrinth appear more or less explicitly on all levels of the dialogue. Their presence in all types of discourse has the effect of integrating poetic, dramatic and technical passages into a single artistic whole, colored by the emotions evoked by this vivid and familiar tale.

The introduction’s emphasis on Apollo’s close ties to Theseus prepares for the complex system of themes, motifs and images in the sphere of the god that are structurally and expressively crucial.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the dialogue Apollo is continually evoked, directly or through his functions of salvation, purification, healing, initiation, and music, in all the senses it carried in Greek culture, from artistic representation through harmony, to the underlying intelligible order of the cosmos.

Music is first explicitly introduced when Evenus questions Phaedo about Socrates’ versifying in prison. It reappears at intervals, as in Socrates’ comparison of himself to the swans that sing at the approach of death (84d8-85b9). But, as we shall see, it is present by implication in the theme of harmony and dissonance of emotions, sensations and concepts that pervades the dialogue almost from the beginning. In this form it is carried over into the technical discussion in Socrates’ demonstration to Simmias that, in claiming that the soul is an attunement and that knowledge is recollection, he is presenting two *logoi* that do not *harmonize* with each other, that is, entertaining two incompatible propositions, and is therefore *out of tune* with himself (92a2-95a3, particularly 92c3-8 and 95a1-2). By implication throughout the dialogue, and in these passages most explicitly, philosophy’s musical mission is to substitute harmony for dissonance in the soul. The suggestion is made for the last time in the final scene when Crito asks Socrates, “How shall we bury you?”

and Socrates points out to him that it is not Socrates but his body that they will bury and emphasizes the dangers of such misspeaking: "...not speaking rightly (*kalôs legein*) is not only *out of tune* (*plêmmeles*) as far as itself goes, but it also creates harm in souls. So you must be confident (*tharreîn*) and say that you are burying my body" (115c2-116a1). And again when his friends begin to weep he reminds them that it was to avoid such a false note (*mê tauta plêmmeleioien*) that he sent the women away. For he has heard that one should die *en euphêmiâi* (117d7-e2). Here dissonance is elevated to the status of sacrilege.

The musical theme finds its climax, of course, in the myth, which, in addition to being an incantation, is also *mousikê* in a more familiar sense, a performance of a work of art, a great composition in words, quite literally a [153]swan song, an enactment of Socrates' description of the response of Apollo's prophetic birds to approaching death.<sup>13</sup> As a devotee of Apollo Socrates makes music about death in words and actions—in poetic outpourings, by inducing harmony in the arguments and the souls of his companions, and ultimately in the way he dies without the *plêmmeleia* for which he rebukes Crito and his other friends.

The Theseus story also introduces the journey of salvation. This figure, pervading the dialogue as the soul's journey, *enthende ekeise*, from here to there, from this world to the next, from matter to idea, on the skiff of the *logos*, repeatedly associates the philosopher's mission of salvation with the heroic journey from Athens to Crete on which Theseus both saved his comrades and was himself saved.

In the opening account of Theseus' Cretan adventure the monster in the maze, without being directly mentioned, is an inescapable presence. Though less explicitly presented than the images, themes and motifs associated with Apollo and the soul's journey, this figure is also frequently evoked throughout the dialogue.<sup>14</sup> Overt references are relatively few, but minotaur-like creatures appear from time to time. In the second introduction we encounter a two-bodied monster of pleasure and pain (60b3-c8). In the inner frame at the dialogue's first emotional crisis, Cebes imagines fear-bogies, *mormolukeia*, against which *epôidai*, incantations, are needed (77e3-7). In the inner frame again, during the dialogue's major emotional crisis, when the plausibility of the lyre and loom criticisms has shattered the participants' ability to believe in *any* arguments, Socrates, to encourage Phaedo to take on *both* arguments, invokes the story of how Heracles, with the help of Iolaus, defeated not one but two monsters simultaneously, the hydra and the crab (like the minotaur in the Theseus story not directly named but inseparable from the tale), and offers to play Iolaus to Phaedo's Heracles as long as there is daylight (89c1-10). All of these monsters are shocking, therefore monstrous, by virtue of embodying incongruous elements—the bull/man minotaur, the two-bodied monster of pleasure and pain, the *mormolukeia*, fear masks that combine human and animal characteristics,<sup>15</sup> the many-headed hydra, the crab of abnormal size.

The notion of the association of incompatible elements is present in both introductions. It appears in the first introduction immediately after the

reference to Theseus' Cretan mission, in Phaedo's description (58a1-59b3) of the "paradoxical emotion" (*atopon ... pathos*, 59a5) of mixed pleasure and pain by which Phaedo and his friends were confused and disturbed (*etetaragmên*, 59b4). It recurs in the second introduction in connection with another monster figure. Socrates, as he rubs his leg after the fetter is removed, picks up Phaedo's two terms for the strangeness of his conflicting emotions of pleasure and pain, *thaumasios* and *atopos*, and applies them to the apparently opposite sensations of pain closely followed by pleasure in his leg. One sensation inevitably succeeds the other, he suggests, as if they were two bodies joined by a single head (60b1-c8). This monster with two bodies and one head is a visualization of the relation of pleasure to its opposite, or what appears to be its opposite (*to dokoun enantion einai*, 60b5), pain. Here real or apparent contradiction, rather than simple incongruity, is associated with something monstrous, eerie, [154]*atopon*, that arouses wonder. The notion of incongruity or contradiction and the image of a monster, introduced separately in the first introduction, are reintroduced joined in a single image in the second introduction. They will reappear even more explicitly linked in the dialogue's most technical final argument (100e8-103c9).

Fear is of course implicitly associated with the ravaging monsters of the Theseus and Heracles tales. This association is made stronger by the placement of the allusion to Heracles at the end of the passage that dramatizes the crisis of fear and disbelief that follows Simmias' and Cebes' objections (88c1-89c13). The gravity of the crisis is further marked by a return, first to the inner frame as Phaedo describes how the setback in the argument confounded everyone (*anataraxai*) and threw them into a state of disbelief (*eis apistian katabalein*, 88c4); and then to the outer frame as Echecrates breaks in with an "*ô Phaidôn*" to say that he feels the same way, and wants to know how Socrates reacted. Phaedo, with an "*ô Echekrates*" that keeps us in Phlius, describes his own amazement at how good-humoredly and calmly Socrates reacted to the objections (88c8-89a7). Plato returns us to the inner dialogue, and to the allusion to Heracles' confrontation with the two monsters, with the humorous and tender exchange between Socrates and Phaedo about whether Phaedo should cut his hair tomorrow in mourning for Socrates, or today in mourning for the *logos*. The crisis is further highlighted by the fact that this passage is the only occasion on which Phaedo speaks with his own voice in the dialogue in prison, the only time that we hear Phaedo in Phlius telling Echecrates what Phaedo in Athens said to Socrates.

Fear is associated by Cebes with the monster when he describes "the child in us" who fears that the soul will be dissipated and blown away as it leaves the body at death (77d5-e9). In spite of its childishness this fear threatens to persist and to undermine the more rational argument, as the *mormolukeia*, fear-bogies, mere fictions or masks, have the power to scare children.

The monster is explicitly connected with both fear and incompatibility, here in the form of contradiction, in the discussion of *aitiai* in the climactic final part of Socrates' answer to Cebes' loom argument. Socrates insists that



the *aitia* of someone being taller or shorter than someone else can only be tallness or shortness. Cebes, he says, would be afraid (*phoboumenos*, 101a5) that if he claimed someone was taller “by a head” and also shorter “by a head,” an opposing argument (*enantios logos*, 101a6) would answer “first [you are saying that] the tall is taller and the short shorter by the same thing, and then that the taller man is taller by a head, which is short; and this is a monster (*teras*) that someone should be tall because of something short. Wouldn’t you be afraid (*an phoboio*) of this [answer]?” (101a7-b2). The emotional language of the poetic and dramatic passages intruding into this technical argument links contradiction to a monster to be feared and coped with like the minotaur or the hydra. This is the same fear that, as the arguments and counterarguments become more complex, appears in the drama of the inner frame with escalating intensity when, after each Socratic explanation, yet another *logos* is raised that seems to contradict and so invalidate whatever argument for the soul’s immortality has just been presented.

[155] In this climactic argument expressions of fear proliferate as Socrates multiplies examples of contradictory statements that would evoke it—*phoboio an* (101b5), *phobos* (101b7), *dediôs* (101c9). Finally, in describing the procedure for dealing with an attack on the hypothesis itself—that the ideas are the *aitiai*—he reintroduces the musical motif. The proper response to such an attack is to investigate whether the consequences (*ta hormêthenta*) of the hypothesis are in tune (*sumphônei*) or out of tune (*diaphônei*) with each other (101d5). The conquest of the fear-inspiring monster of contradiction is, through this language, assimilated to the musical activity of banishing dissonance, at the moment when one of the most fundamental and unquestionable assumptions of the dialogue is being asserted. And through this language, the dialogue’s most technical argument is infused with the emotions generated by two of the dialogue’s principal figures of speech, the monster and music. Simmias’ and Cebes’ strong assent to this argument indicates its critical importance. A return to the outer frame, with its familiar “ô *Phaidôn* ... ô *Echekrates*,” then reinforces the effect of their words (102a2-9).

In the transition to the last stage of this final, crucial argument one more allusion to the fear associated with contradiction is emphasized by another return to the inner frame (103a4-c6). An unnamed person breaks in to point out what he believes to be a contradiction between the present argument and the earlier argument about *genesis* (70d1-71a11). Recognizing how much courage it takes at this moment to confront any weakness in the argument, Socrates commends the speaker for his bravery, *andrikôs* ... *apomnêmoneukas* (103b1). He then distinguishes opposites as properties of things (*pragmata*, 103b2), in which an opposite may succeed, i.e., come into being, from its opposite (as, for example, pleasure succeeded pain in Socrates’ leg), from the opposites themselves which can never become their opposites. Like all the other objectors this anonymous speaker has fallen back into the world of becoming. By confounding the world of being with the world of becoming he has acted out the error just described, confusing two different orders of *aitiai* and mixing

everything up together like the *antilogikoi* (101c-102a1). But even after this apparent contradiction is disposed of, Socrates senses and Cebes acknowledges a persisting undercurrent of fear and confusion (*etaraxen*, 103c4; *tarattei me*, 103c6) connected with other possible objections. Every time Socrates disposes of an objection the argument, hydra-like, generates a new one.

This discussion is conceptually crucial, of course, because of the importance for the rest of the argument of understanding the distinctions between different kinds of *aitiai*. But it is not *just* a formulation of abstractions. Its expressive language never lets us forget its affinities with a heroic enterprise of salvation under the auspices of Apollo. Confusing different orders of *aitiai* hinders our disengagement from the imprisoning body. Misspeaking, as Socrates reminds Crito, can harm the soul.

Every apparent contradiction creates fear and confusion in Socrates' friends as they pursue their enquiry into whether it is right to be glad to die. Each opposing argument, beginning with the paradox that the philosopher will wish to die but will not commit suicide, involves confronting a *teras*, an apparent or real contradiction. This final argument about the *aitiai*, with the *idea* of [156]opposites as its crucial center, presents in its purest, most general form a theme that has haunted the dialogue since Phaedo's description of his conflicting feelings on the day of Socrates' death.

The maze, in addition to being implicit in the references to the monster just described, is directly suggested in the myth by the branching paths of the approach to Hades in which those not initiated by philosophy go astray and by the winding underground rivers in which the uninitiated are doomed to wander for long periods or disappear forever.<sup>16</sup> Less obviously the whole dialogue, as Burger points out, can be seen as a recreation of the maze. Courageously confronting each objection, Socrates uses the art of the *logos* to lead his friends through the intricacies of argument to a clarification, as Theseus after confronting the minotaur uses Ariadne's thread to find his way out of the maze.<sup>17</sup> But Socrates' clarifications are never final. After each one he is confronted with a new *teras*, another terrifying and disorienting objection. The reader, following the participants through these alternations of momentary escape and long-term bafflement, shares their experience of groping to find their way out of a maze. Even at the end of the dialogue escape is still in doubt.

I believe the maze, like music and the monster, is also evoked through language. A particularly vivid example is the mazelike final argument just discussed through which Socrates deftly leads the company. The maddeningly confusing structure of the sentence in which Socrates describes Simmias as both tall and short (taller than Socrates, shorter than Phaedo) can perhaps be explained as a playful reminder of the analogy between Socrates' task of dealing with a difficult argument and Theseus' task of threading a maze. It must be read in Greek since a translation cannot, without losing sense, reproduce the mazelike effect of the weaving word order, and the bewildering sequence of like-sounding forms of compounds of *echô*—*huperechein* ... *hupechôn* ... *parechôn* ... *huperechon* (102c10-d2).

οὕτως ἄρα ὁ Σιμμίας ἐπωνυμίαν ἔχει σμικρός τε καὶ μέγας εἶναι, ἐν μέσῳ ὧν ἀμφοτέρων, τοῦ μὲν τῷ μεγέθει ὑπερέχειν τὴν σμικρότητα ὑπέχων, τῷ δὲ τὸ μέγεθος τῆς σμικρότητος παρέχων ὑπερέχον. καὶ ἅμα μειδιάσας, Ἔοικα, ἔφη, καὶ συγγραφικῶς ἐρεῖν, ἀλλ' οὐδ' ἔχει γέ που ὡς λέγω.

Accordingly Simmias is characterized as being short and tall, being between the two [Socrates and Phaedo], to the tallness of the one submitting his shortness for overtopping and to the other providing his [Simmias'] height which overtops his [Socrates'] shortness.

Socrates himself points to its parodic effect when he smiles and says, “I seem to be talking like a composer of speeches [*suggraphikōs*]” (102d2-3). I take it that Socrates is referring to the complex stylistic effects, the jingles and contorted word order, of some of the more mannered rhetoricians. Here again, if my analysis is correct, a verbal device fuses the mythological and technical levels of the dialogue.

A triple pun on *Hâidês* (Hades), the sphere of death, *âidein* (song), the sphere of Apollo, and *aïdes* (the invisible), the sphere of the ideas, deployed [157] over the last two thirds of the dialogue (77e8-115a1, 38 Stephanus pages), is still another linguistic device that joins the worlds of myth and poetry and the world of technical philosophical concepts. In addition it serves as a recurrent reminder that Socrates as a philosopher is also a practitioner of Apollo's musical art.

The pun *âidein/Hâidês*, linking death and song, occurs first in connection with Socrates as the much needed *epôidos*, the producer of incantations to charm away fear, when Cebes speaks of “a child in us” who, in spite of the persuasiveness of the arguments, continues to fear death, as children fear bogies, *mormolukeia* (77e3-78a2).

The demonstration that follows this passage contributes the third element of the pun (78c10-84b8). Socrates argues that the soul belongs to the world of immutable, pure, indestructible invisible things, *ta aïdê*, which in contrast to visible things, *horata*, perceived by the senses, are perceptible only to the mind. But we know that some invisible things (smells, for instance) *are* perceived by the senses. Throughout this passage Plato substitutes *aïdes* and *aïdê* for the more accurate technical term *noêton* (slipped in just twice, 81b7 and 83b4, perhaps to avoid misinterpretation) to drive home the pun, *Hâidês aïdê*, which is twice made explicit (80d6 and 81c11). For the sake of the pun Plato does not hesitate to contaminate a technical philosophical argument with an inaccurate but expressive word.

The three elements are first brought together at the end of this demonstration of the link between *Hâidês aïdê* as Socrates reintroduces the link between *Hâidês âidein*. Attempting to reassure Simmias, he compares himself to a dying swan whose “exit song,” *exâidein*, is one of joy not fear or grief (84e1-85b9). The swans, he says, sing, *âidousi*, in anticipation of the

blessedness in *Hâidês*, and Socrates, a fellow servant with the swans and consecrated to the same god, also possesses the art of prophecy and, like them, rejoices at the approach of death (84e5-85b6). To draw attention to the word play on *âidein*, *Hâidês*, *aides*, Plato uses some form of the verb *âidein* seven times in the passage which I have just paraphrased. When Socrates celebrates in argument or myth the place of death, *Hâidês*, he enacts the triple pun. For he is also celebrating both the place of singing, *âidein*, and the place of the unseen, *ta aïdê*—an expressively compressed way of equating the philosopher’s “music” with his practice of the art of dying. The technical argument about the sphere of the *noêta* and the lyrical fantasy about the swans collapse into each other. The argument is retroactively infused with lyrical feeling, the fantasy takes into itself the abstractions of the argument. Finally, at the end of the myth, Socrates tells his friends that they must sing the myth of the afterlife like an incantation, *epâidein*, to strengthen their belief in the immortality of the soul and charm away their fear of the passage to Hades (114d1-115a1). By now, the single word *epâidein* in association with Hades is enough to revive the triple pun with its expressive and conceptual content. The idea of incantation also carries with it, of course, the idea of Apollo’s function as healer and of the healing *pharmakon*, the bringer of life through death, for which Socrates offers thanks to Apollo’s son Asclepius. Through the triple pun, the mythological place of death, which has just been presented in such vivid detail in the myth, [158]and Apollo’s functions of healing and song are read into the philosophical concept of the sphere of the invisible intelligible *eidê*. The worlds of myth and poetry and the world of technical philosophical concepts are fused in a single expressive unity.

Discussion of the overall implications of this merging of worlds through linguistic and stylistic devices must await a more detailed study of their presence, absence, or variation over the whole range of Plato’s work. The conclusions that follow, though based on *Phaedo*, apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the earlier dialogues up to and including *Republic*, in all of which the use of such devices can be easily demonstrated. I suspect that with modifications they also characterize the later dialogues, though the task of demonstrating this is necessarily more complex.

In *Phaedo* the literary and philosophical elements act together to form one indivisible whole, because, for Plato, the approach to reality through the practice of philosophy is not exclusively intellectual but involves the whole psyche. The devotion, daring, and faith to confront and master the instinctive fears and desires that block the soul’s progress toward reality are as essential to philosophy as skill in argument. The nature of these desires and fears, the heroic quality of the philosopher’s ordeal, cannot be communicated in an exclusively discursive medium, but require expressive representation in drama and poetry. Like Theseus, Socrates, struggling to save his friends from the monster of incongruity in the maze of the argument, exhibits not only skill but heroism. His skill, his Ariadne’s thread, is the art of the *logos* which enables him to thread his way through the arguments that confound his friends. His

heroism is his faith in the *logos* and his acceptance of the risk that he might have to jettison his basic hypothesis and start over. The real tragedy for which Phaedo should cut his hair in mourning would be that the *logos* should die, that is, prove a useless tool for dispelling the terror and confusion that impede the soul's liberation. Socrates can sympathize with and understand his friends' consternation and disorientation because he himself, at a higher level, repeatedly risks the same danger.

Like Theseus, Socrates does not save himself. He *is saved* by achieving the heroic stature to confront and grapple with the ultimate danger, saved by his deeper relation to reality which enables him to follow where the argument leads even at the risk of being engulfed by chaos. Hence the suggestion of divine intervention in Phaedo's use of *esôthê* and the sacramental tone that informs his whole narrative.<sup>18</sup>

The superior confidence and almost daemonic vitality that Socrates derives from his better grasp of the ideas can afford ordinary people some reassuring evidence of the life-giving power which Socrates reveres and serves. In witnessing Socrates' encounter with the monster in the maze his friends can begin to acquire the moral and intellectual resources needed to begin to approach reality. At the end of the dialogue, though not completely delivered from obstructing feelings, they do not give up. As the conversation in Phlius shows, the *logos*, the essential story of Socrates' words and deeds, remains alive after the body of Socrates has perished, manifesting the power of the ideas by [159]which Socrates lived and died to transcend the death of the flesh and impel those who come after to continue his quest.

Socrates' religious reverence for the inexpressible source of being is imparted to his friends not by abstract arguments alone but by the totality of things said and done on the day of his death and lives on in their memories. Through witnessing in Phaedo's expressive narrative and his framing exchange with Echecrates the experience of these friends Plato's readers gain some realization of Socrates' sense of the sanctity and mystery of being. The dialogue's double frame dramatizes the way, through narrative, the *logos* achieves a kind of immortality.<sup>19</sup>

Our distinction between literary and philosophical sections of the dialogue is artificial. It is not just that each should be read in the light of the other, they interpenetrate each other so that there is no hard and fast line between them. Poetry is not segregated in the passages of drama, fantasy, and myth. *Every* part of the dialogue is poetry, or, if you prefer, philosophy. It is this organic fusion of concrete human feeling and experience with the abstract and miraculous that gives the dialogue its peculiar radiance.



## NOTES

\*Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at the symposium "Interpreting Plato" in Santa Cruz (May 1987), and at meetings of Columbia University's Society of Fellows in the Humanities and Seminar on Classical Civilization (Fall 1987). I am grateful to the participants in all those events for many stimulating comments, most particularly to Seth Schein and Gregory Vlastos for valuable ongoing discussion and encouragement to persevere with this project for which I am only onesidedly qualified. I wish to thank Aryeh Kosman for kindly sharing with me two unpublished essays which I have relied on in shaping my discussion about the inseparability of the "literary" and philosophical passages. I also wish to thank David Halperin for letting me study a draft of his unpublished article on narrativity in *Symposium* which has helped to deepen and refine my understanding of the function of narrative in *Phaedo*. Finally I wish to thank the editors of this volume for invaluable critical suggestions and the anonymous referee for important technical comments.

1. A good, but necessarily selective bibliography of advocates and practitioners of this unitary approach may be found in Charles L. Griswold Jr., *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (New Haven 1986) 244-45 notes 7 and 8. The list could be very much extended. I will add only Helmut Kuhn, "The True Tragedy: On the Relationship between Greek Tragedy and Plato," *HSCP* 52 (1941) 1.1-40 and 53 (1942) 2.37-88; Griswold's own book; Mitchell H. Miller Jr., *Plato's Parmenides: The Conversion of the Soul* (Princeton 1986); and G. R. F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge 1987). Recently Kenneth Dorter, *Plato's Phaedo: An Interpretation* (Toronto 1982) and Ronna Burger, *The Phaedo: A Platonic Labyrinth* (New Haven 1984) have applied this method to *Phaedo*. Nowhere among these authors, not even in E. N. Tigerstedt's monumental survey in *Interpreting Plato* (Upsala 1977), have I found any recognition in principle of the distinction made in the second paragraph [160] of this essay between the poetic and the dramatic aspects of the literary dimension of the dialogues, or any extensive consideration in practice of Plato's poetic artistry. Though Paul Friedländer argues eloquently that the dialogues must be understood as a special form of poetry (*Plato: An Introduction*, H. Meyerhoff trans., 3 vols. [Bollingen Series 59, New York 1958; 2nd German ed. Berlin 1954] *passim*, but see particularly 1.118-25), his study does not include any detailed analysis of Plato's poetic practice. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge 1986), is unquestionably the most "literary" of Plato's recent critics but she reaches her apparently literary, and sometimes very poetic readings by methods which are usually not strictly literary. They are closer to the methods of those members of the group Tigerstedt calls "esotericist" (63-92) who, using as evidence literary devices considered without reference to their overall functions in the text, *read into* the text particular views, personal or philosophic (e.g., the neo-Platonists, Leo Strauss). This kind of interpretation is often mistaken for *literary* interpretation. But literary interpretation, though it uses the same kind of evidence, verbal and formal devices, investigates how these devices are employed *throughout the text* as part of a coherent artistic scheme. *Plato's Phaedo*, John Burnet,

ed. and comm. (Oxford 1911), has been used for all references and quotations. The translations in the text are my own.

2. Ferrari (supra n. 1) 30, 34, 58, 66-67, 87, 121-25, 138-39, 201 and *passim*, using rather different kinds of evidence, reaches a similar conclusion. He relies mainly on eliciting underlying assumptions to explain the dialogue's alternation of expressive and discursive language and demonstrate that both are essential to philosophy. His analysis is tied closely to the text but only occasionally to specific literary and verbal effects and devices—notably 16-21 and 185-203.

3. E.g., Gregory Vlastos, "The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato," in *Platonic Studies* (Princeton 1972) 3-34, and Nussbaum (supra n. 1). For the opposite view persuasively argued see L. A. Kosman, "Platonic Love," in W. H. Werkmeister, ed., *Facets of Plato's Philosophy (Phronesis Suppl. 2, Assen 1976)* 53-69. See also Ferrari (supra n. 1).

4. See Burger (supra n. 1) 216, on Plato's words as a *pharmakon* that effects "a separation of *logos* from the living self." See also infra p.00 on narrative as a means of reviving or keeping alive the *logos*.

5. This solemnity could be reinforced if, as Mark Griffith suggests to me, the cretic-paeonic rhythm of the first five words ( — v — — — v v v — — v — ) is exploiting this meter's ritual associations, e.g., supplication, Aesch. *Supp.* 418-27, cursing, *Eum.* 328-33 = 341-46, 372-76; and two second-century B.C. Delphic poems, Powell, *Coll. Alex.* 141-59.

6. On sacramental language see infra n. 9.

7. See Burnet (supra n. 1) ad loc.

8. Here too (cf. supra n. 5) it is possible that meter reinforces the solemnity of the tone. Mark Griffith points out to me that, allowing for synecphonesis of both *kai*'s, this clause scans as a paroemiac ( — — v v — v v — — ), a meter associated with solemn traditional pronouncements. Cf. the quotation from Dem. *de Cor.* 259 (infra n. 9). The religious associations of *sôzô* and related words are widespread. *Sôtêr* is familiar as an epithet and cult title of Zeus, Apollo, Heracles, among others. *Sôzô* and *sôtêria* are important terms in cult: e.g., Firm. *Mat. Err. prof. rel.* 22.1 quoting the words of the priest in an unspecified cult, "Be confident, *mystai*, since the god has been saved (*sesôsmenou*): for there will be salvation (*sôtêria*) for you from your toils." See W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge Mass. 1987) 75 with n. 50. Because of ritual language's resistance to change it is reasonable to assume that, in spite of the distance in time, examples cited by Christian and other late authors accurately reflect [161]usages that go back to Plato's time or earlier. Plato's own use of *sôzô* in contexts suggesting spiritual salvation, e.g., in this passage and at the end of the myth of Er, "...the myth was saved (*esôthê*) ... and would save (*an sôseien*) us..." (*Rep.* 10.621a8-c1), capitalizes on these sacred associations.

9. From antiquity to modern times the language of reverence and awe, which I call "sacramental," exhibits in actual ritual, in sacred narrative, in oracles, magical texts, and various literary representations of ritual or sacred events, the characteristics we see in the examples in this section—concrete, vernacular vocabulary marked by occasional archaisms and poetic phrases, relatively simple sentence structure marked by non-standard word order, frequent parataxis and anaphora and a tendency to be simultaneously specific and vague. For links between Christian and pre-Christian Hellenic liturgical speech see E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos: Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede* (Stuttgart 1956). Some of the above characteristics of sacramental language are referred to by N. J. Richardson in his comments on lines 192-211 and 228-30 of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Oxford 1974) and in his introduction,

p. 61. All the examples of this type of language in actual ritual that I have been able to find are from the mystery religions. The words of the initiate in the cult of Dionysus Sabazius, *ephugon kakon, heuron ameinon* (Dem. *de Cor.* 259), the only contemporary example, has the simple vocabulary, parataxis, anaphora, simultaneous specificity and vagueness that we find in later sources such as Apul. *Met.* 11 *passim*, particularly 23.6-8, a good example of how to be simultaneously specific and vague; Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.15.3, 2.21.2; Firm. Mat. *Err. prof. rel.* 18.1 and *supra* n. 8; Hippol. *Haer.* 5.8.40; Porph. *Abst.* 2.9. Burkert (*supra* n. 8) treats all these authors as valid sources for words and actions of mystery rites. In a culture that lacks a canonical scripture the line between literary and sacred texts is less clearly drawn than it is for us. Norden uses both Plato and tragedy as evidence of liturgical language. "Literary" examples of sacramental language include *Hom. Hymn. Dem.* 192-211 and *passim*, Sappho 1 and 31, Aesch. *Pers.* 694-96, 700-702, *Eum.* 1033-48, Soph. *OC* 1539-55, 1586-1669, and the many onstage celebrations of actual rituals.

10. D. Stewart, "Socrates' Last Bath," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 10 (1972) 253-59.

11. Jacob Klein, "Plato's *Phaedo*," in Robert B. Williams and Elliott Zucherman, eds., *The Lectures and Essays of Jacob Klein* (Annapolis 1985); Dorter (*supra* n. 1) 4-9; Burger (*supra* n. 1) 17-20, 23.

12. Though Athena often acts as Theseus' helper Apollo figures in almost every cult and legend involving Theseus: *RE* Suppl. 13 (1973) s.v. Theseus (H. Herter) *passim*. In the case of the minotaur legend he is the source of the oracle enjoining the tribute of youths and maidens to Minos as reparation for the slaying of Androgeos: Isocr. *Or.* 10, 213b5-d4; *Marm. Par.* FG<sub>RIH</sub> 239 A19.

13. As David Sider has reminded me, in linking mantic poetry and philosophy Socrates takes a deeply traditional stance that aligns him with philosopher poets like Parmenides and Empedocles, and with Heraclitus, who uses the riddling mantic language of the poets though without meter. In using this language to present philosophy Plato too, in his own way, carries on this tradition.

14. There is conclusive evidence that late fifth- and fourth-century Athenians, whatever their general knowledge of myth, were familiar enough with their ancestral hero's most famous exploit to pick up even quite oblique allusions to it. They were literally saturated in reminders of Theseus, in drama, in oratory, in the visual arts. Above all he figured in a primary or secondary role in a round of annual festivals (at least seven) which served as reminders and celebrations of his life and deeds: cf. Herter (*supra* n. 12) 1045-1238. One of the most prominent of these festivals was the cause of the [162]delay in Socrates' execution; it was celebrated every third year as the Delia, in the other two years as the Apollonia: cf. *RE*<sup>2</sup> (1901) 2433-38 s.v. Delia (Stengel).

15. See Burnet (*supra* n. 1) on 77e7.

16. For the worldwide association of the maze with the afterlife see W. F. J. Knight, *Cumaean Gates* (Oxford 1936) and K. Kerényi, *Labyrinth-Studien: Labyrinth als Linienreflex einer mythologischen Idee*, 2nd ed. (Zürich 1950): chaps. 7-11 are those most relevant to the Theseus story and other Hellenic instances. W. Burkert, *Homo Necans: the Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, Peter Bing trans. (Berkeley 1983; 1st German ed. Berlin 1972) 279 n. 26 compares the "wanderings" of the Eleusinian ritual to the path to Hades in *Phaedo* (108a). Vergil's choice of scenes from Theseus' Cretan venture to introduce Aeneas' journey to Hades (*Aen.* 6.14-31) and the strongly Platonizing tone of Anchises' description of the soul's ordeal (6.724-51) suggest that Vergil understood the maze of *Phaedo* as symbolizing the



delusive realm in which without Ariadne's thread the soul can lose its way both here and hereafter. See H. Bacon, "The *Aeneid* as a Drama of Election," *TAPA* 116 (1986) 326-27.

17. Burger (*supra* n. 1).

18. *Supra* pp. 149-50 with n. 7.

19. This interpretation owes a great deal to David Halperin's unpublished article on narrativity in *Symposium*. See also Ferrari (*supra* n. 1) 231 and Burger (*supra* n. 4).