Plato and Gorgias walk into a Symposium

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Gorgias: I would like to talk with you about literature.

Plato: A low subject I think, not worthy of philosophic consideration, but in keeping with your general aims I suppose. Let us see if we can convert you then to the true love of wisdom and not just sophistry. I suggest we begin by remembering that writing produces forgetfulness in the soul, as it is a reminder not a remembering. So the basis of literature is a diminution of soul to begin with.

G: I wouldn’t want to devalue memory, after all I remember whole speeches, but is memory the most important thing? Is memory as excellent as understanding or knowledge, for example? Might not reminding, sometimes, be all we need, and what we need exactly?

P: Need for what? That is the question.

G: For the situation we find ourselves in.

P: And what does this ‘need’, in those ‘situations’, have in common?

G: It may not have anything in common. It’s a word not a reality; although as a word it seduces us to its reality. Why should we assume that everything can be defined, and every situation that we use the same word for has some one thing in common? Such a demand already implies the world is static or fixed, rather than in constant change with our understanding moving likewise, in ongoing change, to keep up with that world.

P: Then what does that word ‘need’ mean?

G: Let me shift a little as I think you might be asking me about what I know? Well what is knowledge, then?

P: Knowledge of the One is but one.

G: Ah, I see, to return to literature all we need do is remember your dialogues and thus we will reach that One. All else can be destroyed or bypassed.

P: All that is false can be bypassed, once we know it is false. But that is why we need dialectic. My dialogues are of no value in themselves, unless they lead to the One, and that can be better done here, in speech, as it is.

G: So we do not, in fact, need to remember large amounts of what they will, in times to come, call ‘data’. In which case literature is no more a diminution than is speech.

P: You are confusing the issue. Rather than writing, people need a teacher, just as seeds need a farmer.
G: I’m not sure seeds actually need a farmer, and do seeds remember? But that people need a teacher is what I’ve said all along! And a true teacher should teach people to think about multiplicity, not to parrot the One.

P: Hmm, you might need a teacher but you might never learn.

G: Perhaps I need reminding? Or is it just that you go on ‘saying the same thing over and over forever’ like words in text? Personally, and I don’t use the word casually, I think that future readers will never agree on your words as meaning the same thing for each reader, any more than they will agree on the meaning of lyric poetry.

P: That is why words need a father to help them, not be illegitimately spawned of writing.

G: That statement sounds awe-fully like poetry to me, and it wasn’t my experience with my father, but that is by the by. Previously I told you that thought could not be extracted from rhetoric – and, of course, using the term ‘extraction’ is more poetry – so is my use of ‘is’ in that equivalence. Thought about anything important requires analogy and metaphor and hence always has the possibility of being wrong, so we should explore different ways of thinking about the same thing and explore different metaphors. But then you chopped up my argument in your writing, so no one knows what I said.

P: That proves my point, and you cannot make your argument without dialogue.

G: Yes, your falsehood is compelling ... Ahg Sometimes I get a headache ...

P: The rewards of lack of excellence, and inability to tame the body.

G: Thank you. However, to return to the discussion. There is a stage, when I am really dead say, at which I will not be able to directly teach people about multiplicity of views, thought and the necessity of rhetoric. Therefore, there is no point to anyone remembering what I have said on particular occasions, as these occasions will not be replicated, given that all is change. Thus it is better to be reminded of the principles of what I, or you for that matter, have said, so the person can think for themselves.

P: I trust that your desire to be forgotten will be met.

G: Hmm, must be in my imagination that you’ve got quite so catty ... But let us take your own dialogues. I presume they are not word for word transcriptions.

P: No they are re-creations, attempts to present what I could remember as best I could remember in leisure and on reflection. I hope I manage to convey Socrates’ person and exemplar as well as possible.

G: I think it is the portrayal of Socrates that will be remembered, and indeed that picture, that image, will probably be remembered better than the actual points of his arguments. But my point is the dialogues are not entirely accurate. Do you agree?
P: They are accurate to the spirit, shall we say, but writing is deficient, as Socrates has said, so they fall short.

G: Would it make any difference to their accuracy if you simply spoke the dialogues to an audience, so that they were not written? Would it be better if they were simply conveyed by memory, and even more likely to be forgotten?

P: On the latter point perhaps we can agree; it is better they are less likely to be forgotten, and so writing has some value. But if they were spoken aloud and if people questioned me about them, then we could see if they understood, and perhaps I could teach them, and this would be an improvement. If they were written and just read, then their meaning could be lost.

G: Perhaps, but your audience would not be questioning Socrates and what he said?

P: No. It would be better if they could of course. I am not as wise as he.

G: So what you are admitting is that the dialogues are not entirely accurate?

P: As I have said, they are not completely accurate or effective, they are written.

G: So they are false.

P: I wouldn’t go that far. They say the truth, but that truth cannot always be found.

G: I think we just agreed on something else, but I will return to that later. Let me say, that you seem to be saying the dialogues are poetic recreations, not literal truths.

P: You are twisting my words.

G: I’m just trying to understand. You see, you blackened the name of ‘sophist’ with ‘liar’, ‘deception’ and ‘falsehood’ and, so I’m trying to understand how you successfully do this in a format that is also false, inadequate and deceptive and shall we say, as a result, specious? I presume it is the rhetoric of the dialogues that makes them seem real?

P: I would say that people recognise the truth, or awaken to the truth when reading them or thinking about them.

G: Making this ‘seeming’ or ‘recognition’ is one of the things rhetoric and poetry is about. At least I don’t claim what I espouse as ultimate truth. Anyway, as I have said, your argument presupposes that writing is not all bad?

P: It is not as good as the real thing.

G: It has now become the ‘real’ thing.

P: That is my point. However, your argument, in this case, presupposes that writing is all bad, and thus the writing is false.

G: I’m nothing if not inconsistent.
P: My point exactly. Therefore there is no trusting you, and no virtue in you.

G: I’m obvious about what I do. I think that you disagree in public but agree in practice. Thus let us agree the dialogues are not true accounts, therefore they are false, even if they are useful lies. And of course you cannot deny that you have Socrates argue in favour of the noble lie. Let us claim the dialogues are noble lies – we can debate whether they are ‘noble’ or not later.

P: There you go too far. However, you sophists tried to display that there was no truth, so you would not recognise it in any case.

G: It is not correct that we said there was necessarily no truth, we tried to display that truth is hard to find and suggest that it is easy to be deceived, and so it is good to be able to master all arguments, so as not to be seduced by the one.

P: Can there be more than one truth?

G: I don’t know – and neither do you.

P: If truth is not one then it is incoherent.

G: If truth is plural, or if we cannot guarantee to reach the one, or if different questions do not have the same answer, then that is simply a fact of life. No amount of philosophy will change it – and someone saying they have reached the one is not that persuasive to me – why might they not be mistaken, or engaging in what they call a noble lie?

P: If you cannot see truth is one, then you truly have no inner sense of virtue.

G: That strikes me as an abuse, not argument. What you are saying is that I sense differently from you, and therefore I must be wrong and deficient. But let us think further about this noble lie, which is not just an ordinary lie. You say that sometimes your one truth needs noble lies to support it, because someone thinks this truth should not be thought by those that they think are less wise than them?

P: That may be true.

G: In that case you noble philosophers have an interest in keeping people ignorant, and therefore, according to your own arguments, non-virtuous. In which case, how can this truth of yours be virtuous?

P: As in the mysteries, not everyone is ready to be told, at that one time.

G: That seems to me, to be simply saying, as did Thrasymachus, that Justice is the advantage of the stronger, and that virtue is as decided by those in power.

P: I refuted that position in the dialogue on the Republic.

G: Whilst in practice supporting it ... But let us return to the earlier discussion. Did Socrates argue exactly as you say?
P: No, but in my dialogues he argues according to his principles.

G: So we are back to where I started – what we sometimes need is not remembering, but a reminder of principles and hence the ability to argue from principles, so writing has its uses?

P: Yes.

G: But it is not true. Therefore not-truth also has its uses in serving virtue?

P: That sounds specious to me.

G: You have said I’m specious remember, and it is what the noble lie implies. However let me make another argument, this time as to why oratory is superior to writing.

P: It will serve to illuminate the failures of your warped thinking.

G: That is pure supposition. But let me begin. Oratory is better because it is not fixed, it is remembered. Writing fixes truth, as for example, people will think they know what Plato thought because of his dialogues, but in fact that writing imprisons Plato, so that he never gets to say what he wants or changes it to fit the situation.

P: That is very close to what I’m saying, but I can see a problem with the way you approach the issue.

G: Indeed, but what I am talking about is a virtue. In the oral tradition, Plato would be pliable, and could be adapted to the situation as it is. In practice, the oral tradition accepts that virtue is always situational, it responds to a situation here and now, not to an abstraction, not to an ideal. We are not imprisoned by your writing – we can develop it. We can, just as you may have done with Socrates, attribute convenient opinions to you, which you never actually said, or held.

P: You are trying to sway our audience by constantly reiterating falsehood about me. But the truth is that truth does not adapt, it is one.

G: That would be reassuring to some people, but is it true? How would you know that is true? : While statements may be more or less true, there may be no Truth itself, that could be another seduction of the tongue. If I agree that a statement may be true, then I am not really implying that there is such a thing as ‘truth’, any more than the existence of a beautiful youth or a beautiful day implies the existence of ‘beauty’, or a good act or a good meal imply existence of ‘the good’. If we say otherwise, as it seems to me you do, then we treat truth as an object, although an ideal object, and thus render it untrue, and indeed inclined to decay and to pass – although why shouldn’t truth change like everything else? On the other hand, there may be many types of truth. As for example the statement ‘Socrates is a man’ is true by definition; ‘the sun is up’ is true or false by observation – after we have agreed on the rough meaning of the words, of course. If we are aware of these differences then perhaps it will help us on our quest?

P: I see you are now trying to attack the eternal archetypes, which are the basis of the real and true. You are also saying you do not understand truth, in which case what is the point of arguing with you?
G: My point is that you don’t understand truth either. You are rushing away from mystery to resolution in an ideal imagining. But you are right about my aspersions on your idea of archetypes. I’m not sure the archetypes are one, or eternal, or unchanging, and I’m not sure your idea of them is true.

P: They are an expression of the One.

G: So the One is multiple, I see, or it has no effect. But that is not my problem with the Archetypes or the Ideas or whatever you want to call them.

P: I’m not responsible for translators.

G: Everyone translates when they read or hear, even if in their own language. We are all creative mysteries to each other, which we diminish, by guessing and by checking, but which we never get to the end of.

P: Socrates refuted the Man is the measure of all things argument.

G: Clever of him, and what did he use to measure his argument, or get people to agree to his argument? But I’m not exactly making that claim at this moment, I’m just saying that communication supposes misunderstanding, and deceit, just as much as it supposes accuracy. Indeed you assume I’m lying all the time.

P: It saves time, and I assume you are more interested in displaying a copy of wisdom than manifesting real wisdom.

G: That leads into the question of why a display (or copy) could be bad, if it was a display of virtue and if the way that virtue was learnt was through emulation of the copy. I think we have agreed your dialogues are such a copy …, but again the problem with the archetypes is simple. If they are real then nothing else is real.

P: That is not a problem but, if seen properly, the great insight.

G: So we don’t have to be virtuous towards anyone, we don’t have to care about any particular person here and now, or any polis, or any current excellence, because they are not really real, just mere copies and derivatives. The reality is beyond what we perceive and live with. By this action, you strip the Earth, and the Gods, of meaning, making them colourful allegories. And yet, from another view, are not the archetypes just the allegory of what is really real? You talk about them in myths, in poetry.

P: Perhaps I veil? But by being virtuous you come closer to the reality of the archetype.

G: So virtue is always situated somewhere else, as allegory perhaps, away from this reality.

P: What then is real?

G: Again, I don’t know, and despite your claims, neither do you.

P: A person who does not know what is really real will not live well.
G: Probably true, but humour me, I will argue that your archetypes are not only not real, but lead people into living badly. Indeed they propel people into the kind of living that must necessarily lead to noble lies, or falsehoods, and deceit, and that is because their basis is unreal, and that unreality makes the world appear unreal to the believer, and thus justifies anything. And please understand in this case I am not arguing that one should never say a falsehood (or indeed could live without occasionally being false), I am saying that it is a fundamental contradiction for you, and in rendering you real, I render you unreal.

P: Oh very well I can see that you are going to make speeches now. Let me question you as you go along.

G: Certainly. Let us begin with your Symposium.

[Enter Aristophanes, drunk]

A: Hello all …

P: What are you doing here?

A: I thought I heard something about a symposium. You can’t have a symposium without Aristophanes. You need a comic, and some wine, for the God’s sake. Do either of you honour Dionysius? Thought not. In such philosophic ways you miss something that is vital to the cosmos. Can you honestly look around and not see the joke?

P: What joke?

A: Thought so. As if the universe was all triangles and squares with sharp points, sticking into us everywhere. Attack, Attack, Attack. Ouch, Ouch, Ouch.

P: You probably mean tetrahedrons and cubes.

G: I thought it was the sphere that was supposed to be perfect?

A: There’s the archetype of the tetra-thingy and the cube, and the sphere, and then the archetype of the polyhedra, and then the archetype of the solid, and the archetype of the form of the solid and then the form, and the archetypes of the form – from which all forms descend like diarrhoea. And what about the Archetype of the Gods and the One? The whole thing goes on forever.

P: The One is primary.

A: Why doesn’t it need an archetype two? With a poetic fit coming on, I pronounce, that Nothing is really primary, unless it’s Nothing; the void – Great Khaos. Khaos expresses the content of thought and life, and the necessity that it is always out of our control, like my feet here. I wish I could scan extempore properly. Anyway, I’ll take that Goddess as real, and say all your Archetypes are secondary; otherwise there could not be as many as there are, and we see variation wherever we look. Infinite variation, everywhere we look. I trip over them all the time. It’s like Fate.
G: I’ll put in a vote for all the Gods, someone has to defend multiplicity, rather than just the one of chaos or Oneness – you two are mirrors of each other – both teaching morals, as if that was not a continual struggle and set of dilemmas. Ethics is only dilemmas and context and that is what I teach – the world as paradox.

A: Without Khaos we would have no choice, so we would have no virtue. Ethics involves dealing with Khaos with humour, as humour is the only justified response to the order of the Gods and cosmos, or their lack of order. The pratfall is the joyous epitome of human effort. And so all good tragedies finish with a Satyr Play and acknowledge the superiority of the comic – or at least its inevitability. Five or so hours of Agathon agony and it’s a real relief. Ahhh! More diarrhoea.

G: Making the comic that important is turning things upside down – I think that is what our friend Plato accuses us of doing.

P: And so you do, misleading youth and people. How can you have a comic monarch and thus good government? Is he to give out tall tales as legislation? Wave a long phallus about? How can you say humour is virtue?

[G and A look at each other] Sounds good to us …

P: But what about order? Isn’t order central to the well-run polis? And isn’t seriousness and deep consideration vital to that order?

G: To say humour is virtue is not to say it’s the only virtue, and (as we know) order can be a tool of tyranny. But talking of tyranny, tell me, Aristophanes, what did you think of Socrates?

A: It’s in my Clouds play, and a good play too despite coming last in the competition.

P: A pack of lies, that by itself demonstrates why poets have no place in a just society.

A: No one comes to my work for accurate, minute, ant crawling descriptions of philosophic doxa – not if they can tell reality from sky – which was my point of course. However, you sir, routinely travestied your opponents and will lead generations into thinking they heard the real thing.

G: Glad you agree. But what did you think of Socrates?

A: Like you two, and like Euripides, dangerous men, dangerous men without an ounce of sense between you all, not even a bird’s fart worth. You are all snide and corrupting of everything that is finest in our polis.

P: That may be true of Euripides, but it is certainly not true of Socrates who put virtue before all.

A: Ah yes, ‘Virtue all’, I now see! How very wise of him. But like many of those who do put virtue first, he lived in the clouds of ideas and ideals and never dealt with the things a human has to live with here on Earth. By ignoring what you call the trivial you wreck human lives, and it’s up to me to save them. And what are we to think when our fate hangs with a fat drunkard?
G: I don’t think there’s a serious answer to that.

P: If we take care of the important then, by definition, we take care of the lesser, so your charge is easily refuted.

G: This is an assertion about definition yet again. Who knows whether your idea of ‘important’ actually covers what you consider to be the trivial? Or whether the trivial is not important, on at least some occasions?

P: That is pure sophistry.

G: Thank you. It is practical wisdom, at the least. Anyway, Aristophanes, why was Euripides dangerous?

A: Someone once told me some words, supposedly said by some son of Zeus or Dionysius: could never work out which, perhaps it was both? ‘Hey dad, let’s go out for a screw, put these thrsyi to work’.

P: We are not in the theatre now, before the vulgar.

A: More’s the pity. The vulgar, as you call them, recognise where their oil comes from, and one of my plays tells you more about real virtue than all the dialogues of Plato and Socrates put together. Actually, now that I think of it, the more you read Plato the less virtuous you will become – certainly was the case with Socrates’ pupils. Which gets us back to this son of Zeus, or Dionysius, or whoever, who said ‘by their fruit shall you know them’. Which in plain terms for the ears of the wise, who gather round the portals of the mysteries, means that apple trees have apples and that crab-apple trees have crab-apples.

G: A wise man obviously …

A: Let’s be clear here. Alcibiades, pupil and kissy boy of Socrates, betrays anyone for his personal glory, repeatedly. Knocks the dicks off statues and profanes the mysteries in the streets – and you call my plays crass. Critias becomes dictator along with Charmides, ruling Athens in submission to Sparta; in a fine display of logic chopping they leave blood all over Eleusis – what kind of Socratic piety or virtue is that? Even Xenophon, a good old fashioned country gent, ends up all Spartan. And of course Plato here wars against Athens in favour of Sparta in his literature. All of them support authoritarianism, because the people laugh at them, knowing better. Now me, I’m happy if the people laugh at me, no problem there, and any wise man acknowledges his foul-ups and his fate, but not these people who feed on their mother and try and destroy her so as to make wise men the only important thing.

P: Sparta was imperfect, but it was a fine disciplined and noble state.

A: That’s the kind of rubbish philosopher’s talk.

P: Well prove it.
A: Like taking beans from a bowl. Which had the better plays, Athens or Sparta? Which had the better sculptors? Which had the better painters?

P: Art is a lie, a mere copy of a copy. This is no argument.

A: Who wants to live where there is no art? Where we cannot express ourselves or the universe? What real human would want that? Even to think that way shows a moral incapacity I cannot begin to satirise.

P: You just defend your personal interests, and do not seek the One beyond interest. Art will not make excellence.

A: Even you, when talking of the ultimate things use art. In denying the basis of your philosophy, you become a hypocrite and morally compromised, as should be obvious. But more to your liking: which polis had the better Philosophers? Which made the boldest political experiment?

P: Sparta was order and courage incarnate – what about the glory of Thermopylae?

A: Yes that was brave, no denying, but what then about Marathon and Salamis? The first one the Spartans couldn’t even be bothered to turn up for. What is so great about suppressing more and more of the people who provide your food, so that you have almost no time for anything else? It’s simple-minded drudgery dressed as valour. Which town had the leisure to listen to Socrates?

P: And which put him to death?

G: If I may interrupt, don’t you in one of your works recommend death for people who promulgate unbelief?

P: Yes. Unbelief of truth because, clearly, maintaining unity and truth is important to the life of a polis.

G: So let me get this straight. It is acceptable for your philosophical elite to secretly put people to death for unbelief, but not for a court to openly try Socrates for actively promoting the same thing?

P: He taught against ignorance, and for valuing the truth; there is nothing similar at all.

G: A matter of doxa I would think. The Athenian court offered him compromise after compromise, which he rejected.

P: Can’t you understand? He rejected falsity. The Athenians were wrong.

G: Maybe, but perhaps, just perhaps, your philosophers can also be wrong, or motivated by human failings, especially if they don’t understand paradox and myth. Perhaps your wise men will sacrifice another Socrates?

P: Proper lovers of wisdom do not use the Law lightly.

G: Neither I think did the Athenians. By rejecting all their offers and escapes, Socrates committed suicide. He wanted to die and thus pass into your truly real reality – you say so yourself – and he was not bold enough to do it himself. In love with death and its superiority to life; his suicide was his final act against Athens.

A: We must honour Hades. But not at the expense of all life itself.

G: Not making life a copy of death.

P: You as unwise sophists cannot see the glory of the One.

G: So you reveal your One is death.

P: Sometimes I don’t know why I bother.

A: How long would Socrates have lasted in Sparta in any case?

P: He would have been honoured.

A: That’s living with the birds. If you want more proof of the superiority of Athens, of a type that will no doubt appeal more to you, who had the bigger empire?

G: Athens of course. But then Plato’s fictional Crete was to have no contact with foreigners, to avoid the spectre of difference in behaviour and belief, so the argument might not be that persuasive to him. However, if I understand the course of this argument, we are close to implying that loving both tyranny and death is an essential part of Platonic Philosophy?

A: I suppose so. If you support the One, and only the One, and that One is order above all, then you have no room for Khaos and life, and so you support tyranny. Like a dog you want a master, and everything that is not One is trimmed to fit. Plato’s den is covered with bits of fingers and toes, and the odd half skullcap. Getting inside that philosophy, you find it a cave of shadows and branding irons and need to get out into the agora as soon as possible. And have sex with a willing girl.

P: Your comic pose is a cover, as you hate everyone.

G: No one lives up to ideals, and everyone lives up to their ideals, but no one agrees on the Good.

P: What you forget is that we all intrinsically know what is good, the dialectic merely allows its birth.

G: What I think you show is that people want to think of themselves as good.

P: And thus, when they are clear in mind, as opposed to confused by sophists, they will do what is good.

G: Why will they not do evil in the name of good, thinking it good? Especially if their companions tell them it is good?
P: To repeat, they need to know the good for themselves, not depend on others.

G: Not even those who attempt to birth the knowledge within them?

P: Those people already have knowledge.

G: But what if that knowledge is mistaken, or the situation can be framed in different ways, and given the variety of things and events is it possible we can exhaust those situations in advance? What if one person or creature’s good is not another person or creature’s good, as when we eat the lamb? What if there is no One? Let me ask Aristophanes again, as I suspect it is relevant, what was so bad about Euripides?

A: A man who worries about hurting the enemy and how they suffer in the heat of war, cannot fight. If he cannot fight, then his polis, his wife and children, are raped and become slaves. In the midst of the war with Sparta, that was all Euripides could show us; we wept for our enemies. It is one thing to criticise the progress of the war – I did it myself – it is another thing to sap the will to fight. Name me another town that could have accepted it, or would have accepted it. I honour Euripides, because I wept too. He was a great artist. I figure him dangerous for the same reason. At least he did not support the victors.

P: This shows the danger of art and the incoherence of your idea of virtue.

G: What if virtue is not coherent?

A: Do I need an idea of virtue, in the first place? What if it is not an idea? If it cannot be summed up by an idea? Any more than wine is just an idea of wine? Well outside your philosophy anyway.

G: I think Euripides shows complexity, paradox and reality. War is tragedy, war is glory. War is cruelty, war is courage. Without those poles you have no sense of what it is like, and no sense of the appeal and the affect. Saying war is stupid alone, then you will be taken in by the first person who can persuade you that attack is glory and defence lies in pre-emptive action. Yet, as Heraclitus says ‘war is the father of all things’.

A: Personally, I prefer Hesiod who distinguishes between strife and war. War is cruel and harsh, but we are forced to honour her, and prepare for her, by the will of the Gods. The other is far kinder to men and stirs even the shiftless to toil, so that we are propelled by it. But Enyo and Eris are not the same. Honour to them both.

G: The ambiguity is more explicit in the poet, I agree.

P: How then should we wage war?

A: Personally I would ask a general who was successful in many battles, not a philosopher. Just as I would not ask Socrates about love or how to write a play, or a dog how to ride a horse.

P: You are changing the subject. How can I dialogue with people whose idea of philosophy is diatribe and who won’t stay fixed?
G: Recognise the reality that nothing is fixed, and then you can cope. You don’t have to seek for the definition of every word – but wait! Your whole philosophy falls apart …

A: I am keeping to the subject. Let me see … if you have disqualified yourself from talking about love by your treatment of your spouse and children, and dismiss the power of Eros, the next God after Khaus by the way, by saying everyone should f*ck for the benefit of the State and put away their children, then you clearly don’t understand anything about love. Where do you treat love as anything other than desire? Where is the idea of ‘caring for’, or ‘compassion’?

P: That is simply desire for another’s good. As I have said Socrates mastered his passion, and realised that the highest love is directed to wisdom.

A: Ideals, to sacrifice reality to again, and messily as well. ‘I only see order because I ignore the rest’. Not my wife, my son, my daughter, my polis, my gods, my companions, but disembodied Wisdom. Our friend Gorgias said something more to the point: ‘If Love, being a god, has the divine power of the gods, how could a lesser being reject and refuse that power? But if Love is a human disease and a fault within the soul, we should not blame it for lack of virtue, but regard it as an affliction.’ We are driven by gods or flaws in our souls, and you, Plato, either deny this or would choose the object of your love to be inhuman. What I recommend is, laugh and celebrate the Gods, and cry and bemoan our sufferings, but carry on. That is a real philosophy, not avoiding your responsibilities, passions and afflictions, and not sacrificing your fellows to an abstract ideal.

G: Which ideal is One, and denies the other Gods.

A: That Socrates should desire to transcend his body and his lover’s body, is not to be wondered at, in a man who considers death a better state. I love you so much I must die – I’d rather resurrect and go again. Not to say that we must never die gloriously, but we do so for the living.

P: This is deliberate misreading of my work and confirms my view of literature. But let us return to the issue of Gods. Aristophanes believes the primal God is Khaus, and the second God is Eros …

A: And now you want me to define them?

P: Well yes …

A: Are you mad? Read Hesiod. Read my Birds, if you want.

P: Don’t you contradict yourself then? Besides Hesiod makes Earth the second and Eros the third.

A: When we touch on mysteries, the things we can never know, then poets frame them in words that we do know. How can we do otherwise?

P: Surely we can proceed through love of wisdom?
A: Your Wisdom is just bad poetry. An excellent poet sees the whole of human life, and hence poets are our true legislators and open our vision. Without them we are blind.

P: With them we are even more blind as they retail fiction, and drunken fiction at that. How do we know that what they say is true? Even the genealogies they give differ, one from the other.

A: Most people in their normal state, and me in my drunken state, know that what poets say is poetry. It makes no claim to absolute accuracy, but it is necessary because of who and what we are.

G: As I said, Plato, your philosophy demands myth, poetry and narrative at its base. You deny it, while I claim it is fundamental to your philosophy and indeed any philosophy. Our axioms cannot be proved any other way.

A: You kill poets as you want no opposition. No other metaphors but yours, which you pretend are true, or you push embarrassedly to one side, pretending to have done it all by reason alone. We Athenians have an altar to the unknown Gods. Truly the vulgar, as you call them, are wiser than philosophers. They know there are unknowns and they recognise those unknowns. Who truly knows all the Gods and all the mysteries?

G: But we know they are not one.

P: This is a waste of time. Neither of you will argue properly so I’m off to where dialectic is more fruitful. [He leaves]

G: We will not argue in the way that you want to argue, is what you mean? And isn’t this ‘fruitful’ just another set of poetic metaphors?

A: Well I think I’ve another idea for a comedy, or perhaps another libation, so I’ll be off too. Thanks gents. [He leaves]

G: And me. I think, at this moment anyway, that Platonism is a philosophy that values abstract ideals, and hence degrades life to a secondary place making death superior; that it renders virtue and excellence impossible because believers cannot respond to a situation as it is, but only to the One (or should they be virtuous in practice they deny their philosophy). It denigrates and denies the myths, images and narrative which form its base or its literature, and it demands tyranny, falsehood and the end of philosophic talk. It loves perfection but Ah Perfection, where is thy sting?

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