

CHAPTER 1

Mortal Bodies

he lowered his feet to the ground, and sat like this for the rest of the discussion. (Plato, *Phaedo*, 61cd)

The entire time that Socrates speaks of immortality and eternity, of the withdrawal of the soul from the body, he sits with his feet touching the ground, as if he cannot think or speak unless he touches the earth, or something else; perhaps cannot speak of what does not touch the earth except while he is touching it.

And at the end, when he is about to die, causing his friends to weep, when he consoles them by telling them to think that only his body is about to die, not his soul, he regains contact with his body.

Socrates walked about, and presently, saying that his legs were heavy, lay down on his back. (Plato, *Phaedo*, 117e)

you must keep up your spirits and say that it is only my body that you are burying, and you can bury it as you please, in whatever way you think is most proper.

With these words he got up and went into another room to bathe. . . . (Plato, *Phaedo*, 116a)

If it is not he, but only his body, that is about to die and be buried, why bother to bathe? He says it is to spare the women the task of bathing him, the Greek women who remain in intimate contact with bodies, living and dead, male and female, who know more of bodies and death than those who participate in this penultimate discussion of the soul beyond the intimate contact we bear with our bodies. Perhaps we should avoid this question of the proximity of our body at the point of death. Why bathe? Why arrange the body's limbs just so? If we are to end our existence altogether, why bother how to do so?

Such questions arise for those who believe in immortality, who await the moment when they can spend eternity with their Maker. Why do you wait so long? Why do you grieve? Why does death wound those who are sure that they will dwell in heaven? Perhaps death remains an inescapable wound even for those who believe in immortality, perhaps because of the corporeality of human bodies, which continue to touch the ground, perhaps because bodies continue to touch each other, remain exposed to each other after death, perhaps because the materiality of bodies does not allow us to think that only bodies die, only bodies are buried. We confront mortal remains, which rest¹ with us, bringing us face to face with death, with our materiality. It is not death that marks our humanity here, but our human materiality, which death marks with its wound. And still, others die, humans, animals, and plants; and of those kinds of things that do not die, all perish, one way or another, in their materiality.

Socrates keeps his feet on the ground, we may say, all the while he speaks of rising to the heavens. And perhaps that is justice toward the death that awaits him and his friends. Perhaps that is just the point that marks the difference between his stories and Xanthippe's, who utters "the sort of remark you would expect from a woman, Oh, Socrates, this is the last time that you and your friends will be able to talk together!" (Plato, *Phaedo*, 60a). These words are Phaedo's, not Socrates', who asks Crito to have her taken home, weeping, beating her breast in grief (*koptomenēn*), hammering her body, having told the barren truth. Some read this exchange as marking Socrates' and Plato's disregard for women, especially for Xanthippe. I do not do so, for I believe that Socrates has acted as one might expect him to act under the circumstances. He has said goodbye to his wife and child, who are asked to leave so that they do not hear him minimize his death. Later he says goodbye again to his family, separate from his words of comfort to his philosopher friends. Perhaps nothing can console his wife and children at his death: a husband's and father's loss cannot be made right by philosophy. But perhaps a friend's and teacher's loss may be so, if we do not disregard Xanthippe's truthful words and bodily pain. This is the last time Socrates will speak to his friends and pupils. What words should we expect of him at death? The bare truth, perhaps that they will never see him again, or something else, to console them, to help them resist their anger and fear?

I take the beginning of the dialogue to set the terms on which we may bring ourselves to read it, this enigmatic account of Socrates' feet touching the ground and his wife who grieves without consolation, as if that loss is something women and, perhaps, children know, without relief, while others can find some consolation. As we all must hope when surrounded by disaster and loss. Yet we know, whatever tales we may tell to console ourselves, of immortality, the gods, or the good, that nothing makes death whole, nothing will restore Socrates to those who love him, nothing can pay off the injustice of his death.

If I am to take the beginning of the dialogue as defining how I would read it, perhaps I should begin at the beginning. For the dialogue begins before Socrates puts his feet upon the ground and ends describing his death after it has taken place. Like many other dialogues, *Phaedo* is set in place by a prologue defining those who participate and those who remember—always in memory of disaster.

Masterful Echecrates and glorious *Phaedo*, once a slave, meet in memory of Socrates' death, his last day on earth. Echecrates was not there, and asks *Phaedo* to tell him of what transpired. And so we are to read the dialogue, perhaps, as immersed in questions of memory, memories of disaster and of whatever truths may be told. Perhaps *Phaedo*, the eyewitness, truthfully informs Echecrates of the events that took place. Perhaps the memory of such a disaster is always commemorative, less the truth of an event than a recollection of something irreparably lost. I say *irreparably*: on this reading, everything turns on the irrecoverability of the event.

Do we remember, as many claim, to have, to possess, to bring to presence again that which is now absent? Or do we remember in memory of loss, of an absence that will never be erased?² Can death be erased, or is the erasure of death something that can never be expunged or restored? There can be no erasure of erasure, though we may forget. There can be no death of death, though we may not recover. When we remember, we remember absence, loss, erasure. This is the memory I think of as given from the good.

If *Phaedo* and Echecrates meet in memory of the disaster of Socrates' death, a disaster Plato endlessly commemorates in writing, then from the first we may ask how we are to remember such a disaster. With the truth that that disaster took place? That it was a disaster? How shall we go on living in its shadow? All the while we remember that Greece's memory was filled with misfortunes, that the lives of the gods and the mortals who lived in their proximity was one calamity after another: the house of Atreus; the children of Oedipus; the fate of Agamemnon. Now the death of Socrates.

Echecrates remembers the life and mourns the death of Socrates, mirroring his name and the roots—*kratos*, *kratēr*—that link steadfastness, power, sovereignty, strength, and rule with mixed offerings and celebrations.³ Echecrates remembers Socrates, dwells powerfully and steadfastly in remembrance, while we recall that *Phaedo* was a slave, present in place of Plato at disaster. Perhaps this memory divides in two, instituting a rule of power in memory of that which was destroyed by such a rule, and the abundance of powers that memories of Socrates make possible—Socrates answering to the good, always giving in its memory.⁴ I leave Echecrates aside for later return, noting the fecundity of his name, the first name of the dialogue, offering the question of how we are to know abundance, in Plato and elsewhere. A single, famous passage in answer. One who has learned the lessons of love:

when he comes toward the end will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty [*phusin kalon*] . . . a nature which in the first place is everlasting, not growing and decaying, or waxing and waning; secondly, not fair in one point of view and foul in another, or at one time or in one relation or at one place fair, at another time or in another relation or in another place foul, as if fair to some and foul to others, or in the likeness of a face or hands or any other part of the bodily frame, or in any form of speech or knowledge, or existing in any other being, as for example in an animal, or in heaven, or in earth, or in any other place; but beauty absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting, which without diminution and without increase, or any change, is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things. (Plato, *Symposium*, 210e–211a)

Abundance belongs to nature everlasting, without change, giving absolute, separate, and everlasting beauty to all changing things. This nature is material as well as spiritual but is not any particular material or spiritual thing, not a thing at all—growing, diminishing, or forever the same. The everlasting sameness of nature's abundance belongs to no thing or kind, to no identity or restricted economy. It belongs to general economy, circulating everywhere the beauty that gives forth the possibility of truth and knowledge and being. But the it that gives—*es gibt*—is nothing. Giving is given from nothing, no thing, from no being, not Being Itself. But its abundance, fecundity, circulates beings and things that in their material places touch each other, in proximity.

This passage from *Symposium* addresses erotic love midway between heaven and earth, gods and humanity, intermediary; in *Phaedrus* love is unmistakably sexual, corporeal, in its most immaterial moments.⁵ *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus* echo each other, filled with memory and writing, remembrances of the gods and souls that live among them, and of bodies entwined in erotic embrace. If we read *Phaedo* as refusing the hold of the body in the face of death, how shall we read *Phaedrus*'s eroticism? Many read it as incorporeal. I do not do so.⁶ I read it as celebrating the abundance and dangers of *mimēsis*—erotic, embodied truths, memories of disaster. I believe that Plato celebrates the erotic fecundity of material bodies, that he remains with his feet upon the ground, touching the earth.

Today, the day *Phaedo* recounts to masterful Echecrates, is the day of Socrates' death, he who offers himself to his friends, to Plato, to us, and others. It is an extraordinary day in the extraordinary life of an extraordinary man, for while Socrates has not chosen the day to die, he has chosen to die when he might have lived, at least for a while longer. Not many creatures choose the manner and the time of their death. And that choice does not diminish the calamity of his death, for he does not choose to choose—that choice has been taken from him. He must leave Athens to wander in exile or he must die. I understand *Phaedo* to be about wandering, as is *Phaedrus*, about writing and

memory and truth that wander forever without parents or home, unlike Odysseus whose home is kept by a woman, with contaminated memories of women kept in the home. Socrates speaks repeatedly of sailings and voyages, of death as a journey (*poreia*) (Plato, *Phaedo*, 107d), of wandering. *Phaedo* marks the death of Socrates whose memory continues its wandering.

Socrates does not choose his day to die because the festival of Theseus postpones the event, commemorating the institution of Athens as a state by the great-grandson of Erechtheus, Athens' founder. Theseus represents state power and multiple victims, including his own father, Aegeus, who kills himself when he believes Theseus dead. Among the victims are several betrayals, mostly women, Ariadne and Medea in particular, but many others. For Theseus was a famous womanizer, censored in Athens for his faithlessness to women, celebrated for his institution of patriarchy, first against Medea then in his expedition against the Amazons. In return, his first wife was Phaedra, she who loved Theseus's son Hippolytus and hanged herself, reminding us again of *Phaedrus* and *Phaedo*, all shining, glorious, echoing love joined with disaster.⁷ Memories of Theseus join three thoughts together: of state power, the institution of Athenian rule and law; of incessant and uncontained wom- anizing; of betrayals and disasters. Theseus founds Athens on the betrayal of women, rules by further betrayals, is betrayed himself, institutes a patriarchal system by the destruction of the Amazons, and more. Plato sets Socrates' death in memory of Athens' rule under one law filled with countless disasters.

Socrates' death is delayed in memory of Theseus, based on an Athenian "law that as soon as this mission begins the city must be kept pure, and no public executions may take place until the ship has reached Delos and returned again, which sometimes takes a long time" (Plato, *Phaedo*, 58b). The Athens that sentences Socrates to exile or death claims purity in the name of one whose impurity built the rule of Athens. The Greeks bear memory of the injustices upon which state rule rests. All this is alluded to in *Phaedo*, reminding us that Socrates chooses to remain in Athens and die under the shadow of injustice. He does not walk away, as if one might escape injustice.⁸ Still we may wonder at a state that knows that purity demands that executions cease while it continues to execute its citizens for ethical acts, however much they may conflict with the prevailing sense of what is pure. At the heart of these ideas of purity and morality is knowledge that some who disagree with prevailing moral laws do so from an ethical conviction as strong and committed as what they oppose. At the heart of Socratic virtue is an understanding that ethical terms—justice, goodness, love—are fundamentally disputed, in endless circulation, impossible to bring to halt, even within ourselves (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 263ad). I read this as another expression in Plato of general economy in relation to the good, interrupting the hold of every restricted economy.

What if death were another disputed term toward which no agreement could be reached, even within ourselves: the meaning, the truth, of death and other disasters? What if the untruth of the truth of death—the inexhaustible mobility of its demands upon us, allowing for no end to the circulation, no resting place to come to terms with the rest of death, its endless dance—what if this untruth circulated from death to life, and then from life to material, corporeal bodies that live and die and circulate, as if we could never end the endless disputes concerning bodies and what bodies can do, living or dead?

In more Nietzschean terms: what if philosophy's truth was a lie? An endless truth demanding endless lies, untruths, about death and loss? Foreshadowing that remarkable Dionysian thought at the heart of *The Birth of Tragedy*, what if this lying truth was *mimēsis*? What if art told this lying truth more truthfully than science or philosophy—more truthfully and more deceptively, as if we cannot know without further lies which to choose? And finally, ending this interruption, what if *mimēsis* were truth's body, what if no truth might be told, of justice, goodness, love, or death, without clothing, as if bare? What if *mimēsis* wore the truth of truth as its corporeality, in language, writing, and representation, in the sensuousness of expression? If the impossibility of knowing and accepting death lies at the heart of *Phaedo*, could that impossibility intimately touch the heart of truth, always embodied in *mimēsis*?⁹

I have begun with mimetic figures enframing *Phaedo*. I would consider the possibility that such figures, framing, clothing every dialogue, every truth, cannot be evaded. Like death. If we are alive, and hope to know and represent the truth of life, we cannot escape the truth of death, which is *mimēsis*: endless truths in endless attires, endlessly wandering; nor can we escape the truth of *mimēsis*, which is untruth, corporeality, wandering, death.

It is time for *Phaedo*'s story to begin, considerably later than the beginning of *Phaedo*, a story of memory, filled, he says, with joy. "Nothing gives me more pleasure than recalling the memory of Socrates, either by talking myself or by listening to someone else" (Plato, *Phaedo*, 58d). To remember Socrates is a pleasure though the event was a disaster. "I felt an absolutely incomprehensible emotion, a sort of curious blend of pleasure and pain combined, as my mind took it in that in a little while my friend was going to die" (59a). What, I wonder, should one feel confronting the death of a beloved teacher and friend? What might be more truthful than how all those present reacted: "All of us who were there were affected in much the same way, between laughing and crying" (59a) save for Apollodorus, who "quite lost control of himself, and I and the others were very much upset" (58b). Were they upset because they felt Apollodorus to be wrong, failing to understand that Socrates was not about to wink out of existence, but "on his way to the other world he would be under the providence of God, and that when he arrived there all would be well with him, if it ever has been so with anybody" (59a)?

If it has ever been so. If we should believe it to be so. Or were they upset because, like Xanthippe, he knew the truth?

Perhaps we should believe that all will be well, true or not. Or perhaps that we should believe it is the task demanded by death, as Socrates suggests at the end of *Republic*.

And so, Glaucon, the tale was saved, as the saying is, and was not lost. And it will save us if we believe it, and we shall safely cross the River of Lethe, and keep our soul unspotted from the world. But if we are guided by me we shall believe that the soul is immortal and capable of enduring all extremes of good and evil, and so we shall hold ever to the upward way and pursue righteousness with wisdom always and ever, that we may be dear to ourselves and to the gods both during our sojourn here and when we receive our reward, as the victors in the games go about to gather in theirs. (Plato, *Republic*, 621bd)

Perhaps, faced with endless disputes of utmost gravity, involving death, and life, and love, and truth, all gifts from the gods, we must believe in what calls to us from the good even if we do not know the truth of that call or what it says. We should believe in the upward way and always pursue righteousness with truth, should always resist injustice and rest in justice. Where we cannot tell the difference between the one and the other, mixed together, still we are called.

I add the indispensable thought that the memory of Socrates is of disaster, of a Socrates who was loved, and deserved to be loved, and destroyed for what his followers loved in him. The disaster is inseparable from his virtue, from what he gave to us in the name of the good. The good, the giving, is inseparable from disaster. No goods in time can exclude memories of their own disasters. I call the gift and giving *cherishment*, the circulation of goods everywhere; I call the disaster *sacrifice*, the impossibility of goods circulating without destruction, memories of injustice; I call cherishment and sacrifice together *plenishment*, marked by the incomprehensible emotion already noted between pain and pleasure that circulates between justice and injustice, recalling the good. With this incomprehensibility in the face of enormity I return to *Phaedo*, supposing that it is frequently read as oblivious to calamity.

Ignoring Plato. Those present, described by Phaedo, are: "of the local people there were this man Apollodorus, and Critobulus and his father, and then there were Hermogenes and Epigenes and Aeschines and Antisthenes. Oh yes, and Ctesippus of Paeania, and Menexenus, and some other local people. I believe that Plato was ill" (Plato, *Phaedo*, 59b); from outside there were "Simmias of Thebes, with Cebes and Phaedondas, and Euclides and Terpsion from Megara" (59c). Plato was not there, yet we require his memory to know and confront the disaster. Disasters are always displaced, in time, in place, as

if the full embodiment of the event they commemorate contains within itself endless displacements and interruptions. The truth of Socrates' death is a tale to be told, not an event that arrives without clothing. I speak again of *mimēsis*.

Where are Socrates' friends that we remember best from the dialogues we depend on most: Phaedrus, Agathon, Alcibiades, Adeimantus, Glaucon? Not to mention Zeno and Parmenides. Of those present, Phaedo and Crito are the most vividly remembered, in part because they name dialogues. Crito, like the Apostles, was chosen in name and role to receive the gift of Socrates' death. Twice. Chosen to know that Socrates chose to die rather than to leave Athens.¹⁰ The missing interlocutors, who were not present at the death, including Plato: what did they miss except being face to face with disaster and love, in memory of the good?

When his friends arrive, Socrates is in chains. Xanthippe and their son are present. She is taken home crying hysterically. What are these but expressions of the truth that Socrates is about to die and that that death is calamitous, especially to his wife and children. And perhaps to Plato, who is not present? What takes place, one might say, is not a disaster, not death—until the very end—but philosophy. What is represented is philosophy's relation to death and disaster. I have suggested that this relation, to the truth of death, is a lie, untruth—not an untruth that wars with truth, but one that lies together with and in truth, rests in an incomprehensible relation to truth, truth and lie together, as pleasure and pain are incomprehensibly mixed in the face of Socrates' death.

At the very least, we must suppose that Xanthippe tells the truth, if a woman's truth, that he and his friends will never speak to each other again. He and those who love him, those he loves, will never again occupy the same space together, in proximity. What afterlife and divine world could make this loss whole? What restitution is possible for disaster? If the afterworld were as good and as beautiful as possible, as the best of us can imagine, would it cancel the disaster, overwhelm and overcome it? Or do we find it more truthful to fall back down and upon the memories of loss in which we are embedded?¹¹ The mark of such memory and loss is an incomprehensible emotion, forever and intensely enigmatic. *Phaedo* addresses the remainder in death, memories of disaster, that remain forever inexplicable. At least that is how I understand the dialogue. Socrates goes to his death calmly and tranquilly, even celebratively, demanding the same from his friends, who weep. How should one feel at such a death, Socrates' or Christ's, or any other? How should we imagine that they feel? Absolutely incomprehensibly. Life is filled with incomprehensible emotions, marked by death. Also perhaps incomprehensible, like bodily life.

Socrates is released from his chains to speak with his visitors, all knowing that this is the day he will die. He speaks of the pain the fetters caused

him and his subsequent pleasure at their release, both incomprehensible corporeal conditions (Plato, *Phaedo*, 60ac). We might say that pleasure and pain insist on our corporeality despite the recognition we may have gathered from Plato himself of incorporeal emotions, such as the joy of poetry and the sadness of music. Perhaps we may wonder, in this context, at the fact that the Socrates who elsewhere repudiates music and lyric poetry (Plato, *Republic*, 332c–442a, 595a–608b) has spent his time in prison writing poetry, responding to his vision that he should “practice and cultivate the arts,” not “philosophy [which] is the greatest of the arts,” but adapting Aesop’s fables (Plato, *Phaedo*, 60c–61c) in verse. The Socrates who notoriously subordinates art to philosophy incomprehensibly writes poetry facing death under the spell of the Muses, who represent the divine vision given to him in the name of the good and command him to make music. We may place side by side, perhaps, these famous Socratic oppositions, body-soul, poetry-philosophy, *poiēsis-technē*, wondering if they hold up in the face of death. Or life.

Socrates follows with the question I have briefly considered, posed by any understanding of the separability of the soul. If we are trapped, contaminated, held down in our bodies, if our materiality clips the immaterial wings of the soul, why do we not choose suicide to fly? If death is passage from a lesser to a greater condition, why do we not choose to go before our allotted time? “You can tell Evenus . . . if he is wise, to follow me as quickly as he can,” gaining the credible response, “What a piece of advice for Evenus, Socrates! said Simmias. I have had a good deal to do with him before now, and from what I know of him he will not be at all ready to obey you” (Plato, *Phaedo*, 61c). Perhaps we need to confront this resistance more directly in the face of death. Perhaps it cuts more deeply into Socrates’ narrative than we may allow.

Socrates offers two responses, one that philosophers should be willing to die, but though willing should not do themselves violence (Plato, *Phaedo*, 61c). Yet before he explains this confusing conjunction, he offers what I take to be his second response, lowering his feet to touch the ground, keeping them there for the entire discussion (61cd). Plato presents Socrates as typically offering paired responses, one canceling the other, so that we may find ourselves somewhere in between, an incomprehensible between with cancellation rather than opposition, filled with countless questions. I read this cancellation as expressing the disputedness of the subject at hand, in this case death and its relation to philosophy.

A philosopher must be willing to die but must not commit suicide. We know that Socrates is describing his relation to his own death. He could have escaped, as Crito tells him, would have been helped by his friends to escape (Plato, *Crito*, 44bc, 45cd). Socrates answers that he must obey the laws even when they are wrong, must not disobey them though he may seek to change them. He must do what is right though it mean his death. Socrates puts this

in terms of consequences in the other world—"in that place beyond . . . they will not receive you with a kindly welcome" (54d). But that reference carries little weight. As a philosopher, Socrates is summoned by the good regardless of the powers of the gods. We should do what the good requires, knowing that we typically do not know, cannot know, what the good demands, but are summoned nevertheless. Faced with injustice on all sides, touched by injustice in our proximity, we are called upon to do what is just, in the face of death, facing the pain of injustice and the possibility that we do not know what is just. The beyond does not make Socrates' choice to die better, does not pay off the debt, but marks the debt that requires the choice.

This seems to be philosophy's truth, marking the debt that cannot be paid by suicide, but that philosophers are called upon to pay. Death is terrible, and nothing can make it beautiful or good. Or, if this is too strong, death is incomprehensible, and nothing can make it comprehensible. It is incomprehensible as are other gifts from the good. Yet still the good calls, to us and others, everywhere, incomprehensibly within the assembling of being. The remarkable thing is that so many readers have read Plato to suggest that death and suicide, Socrates' death in particular, can be made intelligible. I find the three dialogues that portray the end of Socrates to mark the absolute incomprehensibility together with the radiance and glory of that death. Like the death of Christ. Both in their radiant transcendence of the intelligibility of being impose a debt, give forth a call, demand endless response. All who love Socrates are touched by that call as he is touched by the call he knows in his visions is given from the good, responsible to something beyond measure. Fulfilled in this moment by placing his feet upon the ground.

With his feet touching the ground, Socrates suggests that the question of why, if death is good, we should not attempt to die, has a definite answer. Or, more precisely, to Cebes' remark that he has never heard a "definite explanation for it" Socrates responds: "Well, you must not lose heart. . . . Perhaps you will hear one someday. However, no doubt you will feel it strange that this should be the one question that has an unqualified answer" (Plato, *Phaedo*, 62a).¹² Perhaps you will hear an explanation someday—perhaps not now. And without a doubt you will be surprised to know that this is the one question that has an unqualified answer, a definite and undisputable answer—we might say, to the most demanding question of life and death, the ethical call given to the question of being. Why is there something rather than nothing?—a question without the slightest debt. Why should we choose to be something rather than nothing?—perhaps the fundamental question of life. Justice, goodness, and love are endlessly disputed terms, yet we can find an absolute and unqualified answer to why we should choose to live rather than die. I respond to this excessive claim with absolute incomprehension. If this question has an absolute answer, why should we find it strange, unless whatever answer might be offered continues to be incomprehensible?

We recall that Socrates touches the ground with his feet and that in just a while he will die. What is the way the good calls for us to die? Or if not each of us, what is Socrates' way to die but to care for those who love him, to give to each of those near him what can make an incomprehensible disaster more bearable—asking some to leave, suggesting to others that it is comprehensible?

Sometimes and for some people death is better than life (Plato, *Phaedo*, 62a). Yet the gods are our keepers and we their possessions (62b). The gods are the very best of masters, and they would be angry if their possessions would destroy themselves. Cebes and Simmias are unconvinced, particularly by an argument suggesting that it is unwise to grieve. Socrates agrees that he must “try to make a more convincing defense to you than I made at my trial” (63b). Why, we may ask, if this question admits of an unqualified answer, do we not get an unqualified proof? And if Socrates' defense at his trial is not a satisfactory proof that we should not fear death, why should we expect one here?

Socrates at his trial says that “nothing can harm a good man either in life or after death, and his fortunes are not a matter of indifference to the gods” (Plato, *Apology*, 41cd). If nothing can harm a good man after death, that may be because death is nothing. What Socrates says in *Phaedo*, remembering his earlier words, is that after death “you can be assured that I expect to find myself among good men. I would not insist particularly on this point, but on the other I assure you that I shall insist most strongly—that I shall find there divine masters who are supremely good” (Plato, *Phaedo*, 63b). When Socrates does not insist, shall we not be wary? And perhaps we should be wary of what he does insist on, not that we should not believe—he says we should, perhaps in the face of death—but the being and truth of the gods may not settle what we should do, if death cannot be mastered. We might expect comfort. That is what Simmias requests. Give us comfort in the face of death (63c). If that is what his friends require, how can Socrates refuse, whatever he may believe, given his obligations to care for them in memory of the good? How can he refuse with his feet upon the ground? If he is good?

Yet before he begins to speak at length, he is interrupted by a reminder that he should talk as little as possible so as not to interfere with the action of the poison. He summarily dismisses this reminder as the executioner's affair. We may choose to remember that he is being reminded of the insistence of his body, which is after all at stake in this event beyond all else. He who sits with his feet touching the ground is about to die, and will die in the work of poison upon his body. What comfort to think that that is his body's but not his, Socrates', affair? What comfort can there be but this thought that my body which is about to die is not I? What else shall we hope to think at the point of death?

The question is how we are to face death, why we should face death cheerfully—if we should. One answer, that death is good, brings us closer to the gods, passes too close to suicide. Most people find this claim implausible, even those for whom death is better than some conditions of life. The second answer is that philosophy prepares us for death, is indeed the art, the *technē*, of death. “[T]hose who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death” (Plato, *Phaedo*, 64a). This is, of course, quite comical. Unless it is true. What if philosophy were comfort in the face of death, suitable for those whose lives are not at stake before the disaster, like Socrates’ wife and child? I hold this thought in abeyance for a while. Even so, that Simmias laughs in reply reveals the comfort he has asked for and received. Perhaps, in a more serious vein, the only comfort possible in the face of death is a good story or poem, something to laugh at. Perhaps Socrates is about to tell one of his stories in the name of comfort, with his feet upon the ground, for the rest of the dialogue. Not philosophy, or at least not the philosophy that separates itself from poetry, gives us comfort before death, but poetry. Not philosophy’s *technē* but poetry’s and music’s *poiēsis*, linked inseparably with *mimēsis*.

Let us then speak philosophically of what may be beyond the touch of philosophy, with our feet upon the ground where we are to die, never again to be able to speak with our friends philosophically. Whatever else is true, that is true about Socrates in this moment. Said by Xanthippe, just like a woman, who tells the naked truth. What else are we to imagine is true that might give us comfort in this disastrous moment?

Most people think that philosophers are half dead. Let us imagine some truth to this view, that philosophers are obsessed by death, obsessed by loss and memories of injustice and disaster. Is that not virtue enough for philosophy? Virtue, perhaps, but little comfort. What comfort can we discover in this obsession with disaster and death?

Philosophy is obsessed with death, not just as you and I may be, afraid to die, or like Crito and Simmias, and especially Apollodorus, grief-stricken at Socrates’ death. Philosophers are always half dead, obsessed with death, always in life preparing to die, preparing for what will come no matter what, with or without philosophy, preparing with comfort for death where there may be no comfort whatever. Sending the women and children home, who perhaps know death too intimately to share the obsession.

If we hold this view of philosophy, we close a circle from Plato to Heidegger and beyond among those philosophers—almost all—who are obsessed with death, for whom philosophy is obsession, care, concern, fortitude toward death, preparation to face the absolute terror of death.¹³ As if we might prepare for disaster; as if that preparation were not another disaster. And if we close this circle, do we exclude some philosophers? Here I speak es-

pecially of Nietzsche, for whom, we might say, the entire philosophic tradition was obsessed by death rather than life. If God comforts us and relieves us of our obsession with death, then the death of God is the death of that comfort—not, I would say, the death of death. Nothing can kill death; and if something could, what would that leave of our obsession with death?

Shall we begin with the question of what death might be? Yet perhaps we cannot answer that question without knowing what life is and might be, perhaps the endless question of being. We do not know what life is, what being is. We do not know what bodies can do. But in the face of death we can reduce the infinite scope of our ignorance to prepare for death. Our obsession with death blinds us to the abundance of things, bodily, material, heterogeneous, corporeal things, the plenitude of nature. This is a Dionysian thought. Could death be Apollinian? I am becoming obsessed with Nietzsche. I interrupt my discussion of *Phaedo* to pursue my obsession with Nietzsche facing the obsession with death.

The name Nietzsche gives to the obsession with death is *ressentiment*, understood not as resentment but as the inversion of Hegel's beautiful death. If I am obsessed with death, and I receive comfort in the march of the dialectic, the gathering of history in time, if my death, some deaths, are made beautiful by time, turned from disaster to sacrifice, is there not some residue, some remainder, in which I experience in that incomprehensible emotion before death the lack of comfort of every comfort? If I come before God, I may resent a divine plan that does not give comfort by abolishing every trace of disaster. Under such a plan, which I may resent for causing pain and suffering, the incomprehensible emotion I feel for what demands comfort in the name of the good but can never be given comfort of any kind—called by many names by others: anguish, despair, care, fortitude—is called *ressentiment* by Nietzsche.

In any case, though Heidegger placed himself close to Nietzsche, he seems to have remained at an infinite distance on some points. I mention two here. One is that however we may understand Nietzsche's relation to history, he defines it as a *revaluation*. Nietzsche's entire work has to be read in relation to the good, however one chooses to do so. The second is that obsession with death is obsession with God, even in the name of finiteness.

Death—The certain prospect of death could sweeten every life with a precious and fragrant drop of levity—and now you strange apothecary souls have turned it into an ill-tasting drop of poison that makes the whole of life repulsive. (Nietzsche, *WS* #322; from 75A, 165)

I am reminded of the *pharmakon* in *Phaedrus*.¹⁴ Could death be a *pharmakon*, poison, remedy, cure, all mixed inseparably together in glorious rainbow colors? It is named as such in the opening line of *Phaedo* and several

times thereafter.¹⁵ Nietzsche is obsessed not by death but by life, embodied, material, heterogeneous life, frogs and humans:

The fundamental faith of the metaphysicians is *the faith in opposite values*.

For one may doubt, first, whether there are any opposites at all, and secondly whether these popular valuations and opposite values on which the metaphysicians put their seal, are not perhaps merely foreground estimates, only provisional perspectives, perhaps even from some nook, perhaps from below, frog perspectives, as it were, to borrow an expression painters use. For all the value that the true, the truthful, the selfless may deserve, it would still be possible that a higher and more fundamental value for life might have to be ascribed to deception, selfishness, and lust. . . . Maybe! (Nietzsche, *BGE*, #2)

I hold frogs in abeyance for a while, remembering their bodies. They insist that we remember their names.¹⁶

The thought I hope to consider is the possibility that philosophy has always been obsessed with death, that such obsession is with bodies and materiality, without which we would not die—or live. Perhaps obsession with death masks obsession with life. We may explore the possibility of a philosophy obsessed with life, closer to Nietzsche, where knowledge, truth, and being all belong to obsession with death, not with life. Life, Nietzsche suggests, may give higher value to deception, selfishness, and lust. Maybe! The entire story of these obsessions is that obsession with death is linked with *faith in opposite values*. Obsession with life—if that is what that relation demands, if that is offered in the name of the good—breaks that link in the name of life.¹⁷

I return from this interruption of philosophy's obsession with death to the text that perhaps more openly than any other in the West presents—and also perhaps challenges—this obsession in the name of philosophy. At least, I read Nietzsche as raising this possibility that the text and author who are given authority for characterizing philosophy as obsession with death, and in the name of that obsession revealing another obsession, with soul rather than body, with the spiritual infinite rather than the corporeal finite, that this author and text challenge those obsessions in their presentation and authorization. This would mean that Plato, like Socrates, keeps his feet on the ground at the very moment that he tells a glorious story of heaven. This would mean that *Phaedo* is to be read, not as choosing soul over body to give comfort in the face of our obsession with death, but as retaining endless intermediary movements between heaven and earth, soul and body, abundant and infinite movements of excess.¹⁸ Between heaven and earth, soul and body, *poiēsis* and *technē*, are diaphoric, intermediary movements, endlessly crossing material thresholds.¹⁹

I read *Phaedo* as I read every Platonic dialogue, as the endless circulation of diaphoric, intermediary figures, including that stunning passage by

Diotima I have cited, “a nature of wondrous beauty . . . absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting.”²⁰ Within the context of our obsession with death, we may read these words as divine comfort in the face of death. I read them as intermediary figures of what belongs to no binary opposition, diaphoric memories of abundance, including the infinite abundance of what bodies can do, in the face of death, memories of giving from the good.

With these confessions, given with my feet—and yours, perhaps—touching the ground, I return to *Phaedo* at the point where Socrates is about to tell his friends the truth of death. “Is death nothing more or less than this, the separate condition of the body by itself when it is released from the soul, and the separate condition by itself of the soul when released from the body? Is death anything else than this?” (Plato, *Phaedo*, 64c). If this is what death is, we may take great comfort, for the separation of soul and body excludes the far more terrifying possibility that death is annihilation rather than divorce. We know bodies linger after death, slowly decaying. There is little comfort in that. We may imagine that souls—if there be such—are immortal. But if we are soul and body together, the preservation of each separately would be our extinction. Unless “we” are not both together. Or unless the belonging together is in intermediary movement.²¹

Death is separation of body from soul. But the true philosopher has already separated soul from body, cares nothing for bodily pleasures—food, drink, clothing, sex (Plato, *Phaedo*, 64c–65a). To care for bodily pleasures is to have one foot in the grave. Knowledge is impeded by the body (65ad). Virtue, beauty, and goodness are apprehended by the soul, never by the body (65c–66b). The body is the source of imperfection; wisdom is attainable only after death.

It seems that so long as we are alive, we shall continue closest to knowledge if we avoid as much as we can all contact and association with the body, except when they are absolutely necessary, and instead of allowing ourselves to become infected with its nature purify ourselves from it until God himself gives us deliverance. In this way, by keeping ourselves uncontaminated by the follies of the body, we shall probably reach the company of others like ourselves and gain direct knowledge of all that is pure and uncontaminated—that is, presumably, of truth. (67ab)

Yet Socrates sits with his feet touching the ground throughout this discussion. And Simmias accepts these immensely exaggerated claims without the least qualification: “Most certainly” (64c); “Certainly not” (64d); “That is perfectly true” (65a); “What you say is absolutely true” (66ab). Simmias is absolutely certain about what no one could be certain of, expressed in Socrates’ words: “Something to this effect, Simmias, is what I imagine all real lovers of learning must think themselves and say to one another. Don’t you agree with me?” (67b). Something to this effect, or somewhat different. If Simmias

agrees, and we can see how emphatically he agrees (67b), then he receives comfort when he needs it. If he agrees, if he believes, if he believes it true: “if this is true, there is good reason for anyone who reaches the end of this journey which lies before me to hope that there, if anywhere, he will attain the object to which all our efforts have been directed during my past life” (67b).

Leading back to philosophy and its true vocation. “In fact the philosopher’s occupation consists precisely in the freeing and separation of soul from body” (Plato, *Phaedo*, 67d); “true philosophers make dying their profession” (68a). Death is better than life, in all the ways we strive to live well: life’s purgation (*katharsis*).²²

This is the defense which I offer you, Simmias and Cebes, to show that it is natural for me to leave you and my earthly rulers without any feeling of grief or bitterness, since I believe that I shall find there, no less than here, good rulers and good friends. If I am any more convincing in my defense to you than I was to my Athenian jury, I shall be satisfied. (69e–70a)

We know, and Socrates must know, that this is not a defense of death but a denial of extinction. Death is better than life because it is another life without the body—in the context of the prospect that without our bodies we are nothing.

The rest of your statement, Socrates, he said, seems excellent to me, but what you said about the soul leaves the average person with grave misgivings that when it is released from the body it may no longer exist anywhere, but may be dispersed and destroyed on the very day that the man himself dies, as soon as it is freed from the body, that as it emerges it may be dissipated like breath or smoke, and vanish away, so that nothing is left of it anywhere. (70cb)

If the soul can exist apart from the body, if it does not vanish, dispersed and destroyed when it loses its body, then perhaps it may dwell (here forms of *oikos* [67c, 69c, 109b, 113d]) with the gods, and perhaps philosophy can offer preparation for that dwelling, if the soul can be separated from the body, if the adventures and lives of souls are not adventures and lives of bodies, ceasing to move and be without their bodies.

Socrates’ response is that Cebes’ words are “quite true . . . what are we to do about it?” (Plato, *Phaedo*, 70b). We return to the question at hand, how are we to face death when death means extinction, disaster. Socrates speaks of

an old legend, which we still remember, to the effect that [souls of the departed] do exist there, after leaving here, and that they return again to this world and come into being from the dead. If this is so—that the living come

into being again from the dead—does it not follow that our souls exist in the other world? They could not come into being again if they did not exist, and it will be sufficient proof [*tekmērion*] that my contention is true if it really becomes apparent that the living come from the dead, and from nowhere else. But if this is not so, we shall need some other argument [*logou*]. (Plato, *Phaedo*, 70cd)

What we are to do in the face of death is to tell a story, remember old legends, *mimēsis*. These provide the proof (*tekmērion*: evidence or sign) we need, if we accept them. Death, and perhaps justice, goodness, beauty, all require old legends, call us from *technē* to *poiēsis*. I hold *poiēsis* in abeyance for a while.

If we have not been speaking of it all along: the *poiēsis* of the body, the corporeality of *poiēsis*, the *mimēsis* of truth. The abundance of bodies as general economy; preparation for death as *technē*. Can there be a *technē* before death distinct from the *technē* of causing, giving, death to others or oneself, as the executioner urges Socrates to be calm to make the poison work more effectively? A kind of calmness before death belongs to *technē*: be calm and it will make death better for you and others. Perhaps it would be better to rage at the quieting of the light. Another kind of calmness before death belongs to *poiēsis*. At least, we may imagine that Socrates does not face his death within *technē*, for he tells the executioner to mind his own business. What might be a relation to death for which we might strive that does not belong to *technē*? Put another way, perhaps we can face death only within *technē*, but in memory of *poiēsis*, remembering old legends of the gods, in memory of the good. Here we may wonder at the arguments, the discourses and narratives, that death demands. If death demands anything of us. Perhaps *mimēsis*. A story.

Socrates tells a legend given of old, *palaios*. Whatever he speaks of as given from old is strange, touched by the gods, still a mark of truth.²³ He also speaks of the mark of truth before death as a gift, if we accept it. If we receive the gift of this story of the gods, we receive comfort before death. Otherwise we need another proof, not *tekmērion* but *logou*, not a sign from *poiēsis* but a justification from *technē*. General economy, gifts of old touched by the gods, offer us the abundance of things, including our souls and bodies, in the face of death. If we are not convinced, are not comforted, we may turn back to restricted economy, to evidence and proof. In the face of death, restricted economy comes last.

At this point, Socrates begins to speak of birth and generation, of opposites, speaks of the living coming from the dead—if that is how we are to think of birth and generation, given how widely throughout the natural world living things come from living things. Even today, that living things may arise from inorganic elements is a disputed idea. Yet if we are to think of death, we must think of birth. Perhaps they are in opposition. Perhaps they

are joined in deep and mysterious ways known only to the gods. Above all, where death reminds us of men who gather to face it through philosophy, sending women home, birth reminds us of women and children. If we are to speak of birth and generation, are we not to speak of women and children?

I interrupt this discussion for just a moment to address this question beyond the scope of *Phaedo*. I interrupt with a thought that touches birth and death and bodies, of women and the sexual difference that defines different births and bodies, perhaps deaths. It touches the *oikos*, the dwelling-place, the home to which women have traditionally been restricted and in which they suffer subordination in the name of birth and generation. I interrupt here with this thought of women, anticipating a later interruption.

Page duBois understands these figures of women in the Greek world to be appropriated by Plato to the law of the father.

I believe that Plato's appropriation of the reproductive metaphors of Greek culture used to describe the place of women and his use of this metaphorical network to authorize the male philosopher are linked to a metaphorical project—to the task of monistic metaphysics, the positing of a one—father, sun, god—who is the source and origin of the good. (duBois, *SB*, 169)

I come to a different conclusion reading Plato, but I think that duBois calls attention to something important in Plato: figures traditionally related to women throughout his narratives of the world beyond, given from the gods. Why are not women those who give birth and generate the good, rather than men? I recall female gods and Diotima, Phaenarete, and Pharmakeia, all women who emerge in crucial roles in dialogues otherwise restricted to men. Why are birth and generation holy in the divine world but not worth noting in the human world, where women perform the labors? I wonder if Plato might recognize their divinity everywhere, might hope to open divinity throughout nature where the (female) soul has care for all things everywhere and traverses the whole universe (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246b), a soul that seems incorporeal at some moments but which is female in gender and which enters corporeal erotic liaisons filled with shudders, stumps, fevers, sweat, streams, and wings that melt and swell.²⁴

DuBois reads Plato as appropriating figures associated with women to men. In the same vein, we might read Plato as appropriating figures associated with materiality to ideas and souls. I have noted several such figures where Socrates' corporeality is insistently marked, keeping his feet on the ground. I will note several others, some of great importance on my reading of Plato. Why would Socrates, speaking of the immortality of the soul, separated from the body at death, speak repeatedly in corporeal figures? Because he cannot help himself, because we cannot speak of incorporeality in incorpo-

real terms? And if so, is this an appropriation from corporeality to incorporeality, or an insistence on materiality? Similarly, shall we read birth and generation in Plato—coupled as they frequently are with mixed references to women, some asserting their near-equality with men, some quite heinous—as appropriations from women to men, or as insistences on the femaleness of *poiēsis*, where birth and generation in Plato are to be found? I add, as duBois does not, that I understand the relation between general and restricted economy, *poiēsis* and *technē*, not as oppositional, categorial, marking a difference in being, but as diaphoric, in intermediary movement, following the corporeal movements of angels, resisting authority.²⁵ In the throes of *technē* we remember *poiēsis*; yet we forget. Under the law of the father we remember women as the generation, the origin—if there is an origin—of the law, but we forget. What, we may ask, is it to remember, except in tales of old, given from the gods, in memory of the good? What, we may ask, is it to remember generation and birth, except in corporeal terms, together with women?

Understood as *poiēsis*, birth and generation are endless intermediary movements, circulating among men and women, as men and women circulate among themselves and others. That such movements might be held in reserve for men, excluding women or relegating their birth and generation to the home, would indeed be appropriation, refusing the circulation of *poiēsis*. That women's birth and generation might be held in reserve for them would be another exclusion, another refusal, however unlikely. Birth and generation belong to women, but not only to women, belong to general as well as restricted economy. Birth and generation belong to bodies, are permeated by corporeality, but not bodies fixed in place. Or rather, bodies, life and death, belong to general and restricted economy. The abundance of materiality, expressed in birth and generation, crosses every threshold of restricted economy.

I return from this interruption. We arrived at birth and generation in the argument that life must come from death and, consequently, that souls must live somewhere among the dead. I suggested that such a view denies extinction, denies death. Life belongs to life. Even so, Cebes responds with enthusiasm that "What you say seems to be perfectly true" (Plato, *Phaedo*, 72d). In this difficult and contested space, some of what Socrates says is *perfectly* true. If anything is true. That is what Socrates says: "if anything is true, I believe that this is, and we were not mistaken in our agreement upon it. Coming to life again is a fact, and it is a fact that the living come from the dead, and a fact that the souls of the dead exist" (72de). If anything is true, if we can be sure of anything. We recall that he said much the same earlier, as implausibly.

Socrates follows this improbable argument that the dead are alive and that we can be sure of it with another, famous argument concerning recollection, *anamnēsis*: "what we call learning is really just recollection. If that is

true, then surely what we recollect now we must have learned at some time before, which is impossible unless our souls existed somewhere before they entered this human shape [*anthrōpinō eidei*].²⁶ So in that way too it seems likely that the soul is immortal" (Plato, *Phaedo*, 73a). If we would laugh again in the face of death, we might note Simmias's words in response, forgetting the proof: "Remind me [*hupomnēson*], because at the moment I can't quite remember (*memnēmai*)" (73a). I am sure that I remember forgetting though I have forgotten. Whatever we may think of *anamnēsis*, if it involves memory and forgetting, how can it but be unsure? If it involves life and death, and other worlds? I believe in *anamnēsis* as a mixed memory of forgetting, permeated by forgetting, by loss and disaster, reminding us where we are, face to face with Socrates' death. *Phaedo* is *anamnēsis*. Making us laugh. And cry. Together.

Cebes gives one proof of recollection—if it has a proof—that "if you confront people with a diagram or anything like that, the way in which they react is an unmistakable proof that the theory is correct" (Plato, *Phaedo*, 73b).²⁷ Perhaps this is no more convincing than the proofs of afterlife. "If you don't find that convincing, Simmias, said Socrates, see whether this appeals to you" (73b). If we have a valid proof, it ought to be convincing. Otherwise, what do we expect from a proof? Perhaps *anamnēsis*, remembering forgetting, is another figure of untruth in truth, the unproof, the arbitrariness and unconvincingness, of every proof. Proofs convince those who are convinced to be convinced. As is Simmias, after Cebes' proof. "All that I want is to be helped to do what we are talking about—to recollect. I can practically remember enough to satisfy me already, from Cebes' approach to the subject, but I should be nonetheless glad to hear how you meant to approach it" (73bc). All that matters is that we be satisfied. In relation to death, no one who is afraid of death can be satisfied. At least, those seem to be the stakes. Perhaps in relation to life, we are not convinced, or in relation to the good. Perhaps everything important is unconvincing. What then?

I skip over this second proof, if we were not convinced by the first, perhaps as good or better. Where can we get our knowledge of absolute equality except from recollection of something before sensory experience? The discussion comes to a close in the following sequence: "Our present argument applies no more to equality than it does to absolute beauty, goodness, uprightness, holiness, and, as I maintain, all those characteristics which we designate in our discussions by the term 'absolute.' So we must have obtained knowledge of all these characteristics before our birth" (Plato, *Phaedo*, 75cd). Except that these are the disputed terms Socrates mentions in *Phaedrus*. Simmias has not forgotten that Socrates is about to die, and *anamnēsis* does not comfort him. "Do you think that everyone can explain these questions about which we have just been talking? I should like to think so, said Simmias, but I am very much afraid that by this time tomorrow there will be no