On the Death of Plato
Some Philosophical Thoughts on the Thracian Maidens

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“But there is another sort of old age too: the tranquil and serene evening of a life spent in peaceful, blameless, enlightened pursuits. Such, we are told, were the last years of Plato, who died in his eighty-first year while still actively engaged in writing.”

—Cicero, On Old Age

In Volume III of his Order and History, Eric Voegelin reflected on the central importance of both Plato and Aristotle. His treatise on Plato is an extraordinary analysis of Plato’s life and abiding philosophic importance. When I ask a class to read this volume on Plato, I insist that they do not read the last short paragraph of this book until they have read the rest of the book. I do not want them to miss the astonishment that I myself experienced on first reading it. Too often, of course, such is human nature, this admonition not to read a designated passage has the effect of tempting most readers to read first what is not to be read until last. This reaction is not necessarily a bad idea in reading any book, except perhaps a detective story or Voegelin’s book on Plato.

The last paragraph of Voegelin’s treatise is a poignant account of the death of Plato. The charm of this passage matches the spell that Plato himself sought to cast in his writings. Plato invoked this very literary charm to incite us to pass to the higher things or at least to render us benevolent to them. Indeed, it was his answer to Homer. He realized that if his own style were not as intriguing as that of Homer, his philosophy would not be read by anyone except the philosophers. And it was precisely those who were not philosophers who most threatened the life of the philosopher.

In violation of everything I have intimated in the previous paragraphs, however, I am going to begin this consideration by citing precisely this last paragraph of Eric Voegelin on the death of Plato. I can think of no justification for this procedure except that it is the only way I know to reflect with some care upon a certain extraordinary line of thought that Voegelin’s ending can kindle in us about the ultimate meaning of Plato. In considering the death of Plato, moreover, we are naturally and rightly prepared to compare it with the death of Socrates as Plato himself recounted that famous death in his own dialogues, in the Euthyphro, The Apology, the Crito, and the Phaedo.

We wonder which of the two deaths was the more profound, granting that the death of Socrates was infinitely more memorable and graphic. Plato perhaps had no Plato to account for his own death, though Cicero recalled its serenity. Could this missing philosophical account of the death of Plato be what Voegelin, in the sparsest fashion, belatedly tried to supply? The life of Plato subsequent to the execution of Socrates, no doubt, is consumed by the question that the death of Socrates had left Plato as a young man to resolve; namely, whether there is a city in which the philosopher will not
be killed? Evidently, Plato in the end found, or perhaps even founded, such a city. He was not killed. In the city he founded, we still read about Socrates.

Plato’s own famous pupil, Aristotle, to be sure, had once remarked, after an anti-Macedonian movement in Athens, that he himself had fled Athens, lest it be “guilty of the same crime twice”. But Socrates himself did not choose flight or banishment to another city to avoid the same crime once. Surely, we do not want to suggest that Aristotle lacked bravery. Did Aristotle mean rather that there was nothing philosophically to be gained in making the same point twice? Aristotle knew the lesson of the end of The Republic, that if we do not choose our daemon rightly the first time, we shall not likely choose it rightly a second or third time. Was philosophy already safe then because of what Plato had established to replace Athens, that is, his philosophical Academy in which the memory of Socrates would remain alive? When Aristotle subsequently found himself in Asia Minor or in Pella, was he actually in the same city that he had left, the one within Athens that Plato had bequeathed beyond his death? Does the antagonism of politics and philosophy remain in all existing cities? Do philosophy and politics both point beyond themselves?

II. No doubt, we sense a distinct ominousness in the later dialogues of Plato, especially in the Gorgias, a dialogue full of foreboding, of war and strife, as its first lines intimate. The philosopher attempts to deal with the shrewd politician who has the power to kill him. When the politician chooses not to participate in the philosopher’s sole protection for his life, namely, in the continuation of honest discourse about what “true politics” really are, we know the philosopher is dead (521). His only safety is found if the politician will examine the issues with him. Already in The Republic, the philosopher who returned to the Cave and told his experiences to his former companions was in danger of his life (517). The prisoners did not want to hear that their life was not the real one.

Does Plato’s serene death mean rather that philosophy has been rendered harmless, that Plato died still writing in peace because philosophy no longer threatened the order of existing regimes? Do the politicians now control philosophers by threat of death? Plato himself, in his dealings in Sicily, came close to death a couple of times in his efforts to educate the tyrant. We have no reason to assume that Plato was a coward. He did not dispute Socrates’ courage and strength. Plato’s death seems to portend something else, however, something on a par with the noble death of Socrates. Thus we would be surprised if the death of Plato, in some other way, did not also match the death of Socrates in philosophic profundity. How are we to think about these things?

The following passage about Plato’s final day in 347 B.C. is the conclusion to Eric Voegelin’s Plato: “Plato died at the age of eighty-one. On the evening of his death he had a Thracian girl play the flute to him. The girl could not find the beat of the nomos. With a movement of his finger, Plato indicated to her the Measure.” What is to be noted about this riveting passage? First of all, we observe that Plato died in his own bed. He was some eleven years older than Socrates at the latter’s death. Plato did not drink hemlock by order of the laws of the democracy. To be sure, he did die in the evening, like Socrates. Athens could have let Socrates die of old age, but it chose instead to execute him at seventy. Athens, however, did let Plato die of old age. Old age was the announced by Xanthippe, who told Socrates that this day would be a sad one for him as it would be the last time in which he could converse with his friends. All of Socrates’ days, he hoped, were spent examining life, to see if it was worth living. He had spoken with those who were said to be
wise because he wondered about the Oracle who said that he was the wisest man in Greece. No one else proved to be wise except in his limited specialty. Socrates’ days were spent in talking to his friends, something he enjoyed doing.

Socrates’ last day is best described as his second trial. His first trial before the jury at Athens left certain things unsettled. The friends of Socrates were quite unhappy with it all. Socrates’ life could not end without completing his conversations with the potential philosophers examining him about what he was doing. Socrates’ conversation did end on his last day. He finished what he had to say. The potential philosophers had only tears, not refutations. Socrates took the hemlock calmly.

For an older friend like Crito, the death of Socrates initially represented a defeat, a slurring of Crito’s public reputation. For everyone in the city knew that a rich man, as Crito was, could easily afford to bribe Socrates out of jail. But Socrates debated with Crito about why Socrates should remain in jail and suffer, though the execution could not be called a punishment since nothing can hurt a good man. Clearly such an extraordinary decision of Socrates to obey the laws needed explication.

But this jail and the sentence were not merited punishments for Socrates as he had done nothing wrong, though he had upset the order of the existing city. He did not know whether death was evil in the first place so he could not act as if it were the worst evil, to be prevented at all costs. He did know, however, that doing wrong was not open to him. These public arguments at the trial, of course, did not satisfy the young potential philosophers gathered around Socrates on his last day. In this last conversation, Socrates spoke of subjects not easily addressed in public, yet topics that had to be faced in a complete life.

Some of these friends like Apollodorus, who was to recount The Symposium from Aristodemus, were already weeping. They showed thereby that they had not learned Socrates’ lesson, that philosophy was a preparation for death. When death is present, the philosopher is present. Was Plato ultimately the one follower of Socrates who understood this? If anything the young listeners were very annoyed with Socrates, so that they subjected him to a second, more critical, trial, the trial before the potential philosophers about why he could face death so calmly. His apology at the public trial had not satisfied them, nor had it convinced a majority of the jury.

Socrates, by objective standards, may indeed have performed brilliantly at the public trial in handling the accusations of corrupting the youth. Many of these youths, sons of the leading citizens of Athens, were sitting before him on this last day in jail. Many of these same youth had annoyed their fathers, Socrates’ accusers, by going home and playfully imitating Socrates. This semi-jesting imitation was why the fathers thought Socrates was undermining the city. This bothersomeness is what brought Socrates, from his hiddenness in his private life, to their public attention. Socrates indeed may have convinced some jurors and potential philosophers at the trial that he did believe in the gods, even if not quite believing in the gods of the city. No doubt, in the minds of these young men, among whom, though he was ill on this last day, was the young Plato, Socrates was not guilty as charged in the public trial. But there seemed to be another sort of guilt, even more grave, of which he could be accused. Was the absence of Plato at the death of Socrates related to his own very different death, the death of Plato? Do all real philosophers die in the same way, whether with hemlock or with the sounds of the flute?

III. From the minute they heard of Socrates’ discourse with Crito about how he was bound to Athenian law, the friends knew he was certainly going to die. He had already explained in his Apology that he did not want to drift in exile from one city to another and have the same thing happen over and over in any well-ordered city. Nor would he cease to philosophize. But as often as he had told them that philosophy was a preparation for death, something further was needed
before they would be satisfied. Of course, the last day of discourse concerned the long and intricate discussion about the immortality of the soul. Socrates’ calm before death had intelligible roots that the potential philosophers had not previously understood. The power of the state to kill Socrates always remained. But if it did execute him, it was not a defeat of philosophy. In fact, when the state kills the philosopher, it may strengthen philosophy. The only philosophy that is weakened is that whose teachers yield to the state seeking its own will.

Rather, Socrates’ execution was the judgment on the state itself. No state was to have legitimate power before philosophy if it conceived itself, on its own standards, to be an alternative to philosophy. The philosopher who is willing to accept death cannot be threatened by the politician who, as we see in the Gorgias, loses his power over the philosopher who is unaffected by the politician’s most dire threats. Callicles, Meletos, Lycon, and Anytus do preserve the democracy they love. In so doing they demonstrate the danger of democracy, a danger that Socrates evidently considered to be the most subtle danger a philosopher could encounter.

Philosophy, in Callicles’ view, is set aside in the politician’s youth as something interesting, but not for use as an adult. Philosophy asks questions that the actual state, because of its own disorder, cannot bear. It is better to silence Socrates than to change the regime. The sons of the politicians and craftsmen are expected to follow their fathers, not Socrates. Socrates had called the youth to another life, not to the traditional ones. This was his danger. But the real struggle was not with the fathers but with the sons, with their choosing which life to follow. Socrates seldom talked to those who had already decided, who had already definitively revealed their souls as upholders of the polis, of the ways of life of wealth, pleasure, or power. Socrates could only talk with those who could still change their souls.

When students read The Apology, I ask them to indicate in the text just where they are in fact themselves present. At first, one catches in their eyes a look of amusement or polite skepticism. What sort of a question is it? How could Plato have included each of them in his Dialogue? Yet, each is there, almost by name, certainly by spiritual reaction. On some reflection, suddenly a student will understand. To be sure, they all might have been there as members of the jury. Some of these very students, no doubt, will sit in similar trials some day and analogously vote to kill Socrates, even though most in their schools would sympathize with Socrates when they read him. Others will be there as one of the three accusers of Socrates, or as the potential philosophers whom Socrates was accused of having corrupted. It is not a bad idea, of course, to place oneself within the dialogues of Plato, to find one’s own personality somehow shining through the characters he so memorably describes.

But the immediate answer to the question is that each of us is present when, on reading the trial account, we too accuse this same jury, now alive before us in Plato’s account. Plato the philosopher, because he wrote of the Trial of Socrates, makes us all participants, whether we like it or not. Socrates, with some amusement, had proposed that his punishment be free room and board at the town hall. He had done nothing but keep the citizens alert to the need to examine themselves daily, itself a good service to any city. He was the gadfly. He kept the citizens from being dull. Socrates then turned to the jurors to single out those who had voted for his condemnation and death. With sudden seriousness in contrast to his previously playful mood, he spoke to them with gravity. He told them that from now on, whenever the story of this trial is told, these jurors will be condemned in the minds of any reasonable man as those who killed the philosopher.

The students clearly recognize in reading the trial, that they too had agonized over those two hundred and eighty-one jurors who voted to kill Socrates, that they too, as Socrates said, would join down the ages those vast legions who have
again and again condemned that now immortal and deplorable Athenian jury and, through it, the politics that killed Socrates in a legal trial. Most of today’s students, on reading this result, want to go out and change the world, not themselves. They want to become lawyers and doctors. They do not remember what Plato said in Book Three of The Republic, that a society filled with students of law and medicine is already a sick society. Many students continue to think that more law and more medicine will cure what can only be cured by a reform of their own souls. Again by contrast, we recall that Plato died calmly, at first sight undramatically, in his bed.

IV. On reading of the death of Plato, however, do we, down the ages, also become present at his death? Of course we do. Again we see Plato, in his eighties, a man who has mostly finished The Laws in which Socrates as such does not appear. Plato was given enough life to complete his projects, to consider all sides of the death of Socrates. He graphically delineated the souls of each of the major and even the minor characters we find in the sundry dialogues -- Theages, Meletos, Cebe, Thrasymachus, Pausanias, Alcibiades, Polemarchus, Cleitophon, Laches, Gorgias, Ion, and many others. Each had his part. Plato understood the complexity of character, of life.

And who is at Plato’s death? He does not have a room full of followers seeking to copy down the final revisions of The Laws. No conversation seems left to complete. Aristotle is not there. Nor is Dionysios. His older brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus are not there. No Xanthippe is there. No three sons. No potential philosophers. Who is there is a young flute-player, a Thracian girl. She is not there in any erotic capacity. Plato evidently wants her to play the flute, that special instrument about which he so carefully discoursed in The Republic (399).¹⁶ That is to say, the philosopher dies to the sound of music. The music is not a therapy, but a pleasure. Aristotle had remarked that the gentleman should know music but should not be able to play a musical instrument too well. He knew that to play music well required a lifetime of study and practice, a lifetime that would prevent the gentleman from knowing the higher things, however much music might be related to them, as it intrinsically was.

Plato, of course, does not call in an accomplished flautist, as, presumably, he might have. He calls in the maiden who cannot find the measure. He can still teach her the measure. He moves his finger indicating the beat and rhythm. We are not told whether she picks it up correctly, but we assume she does. We assume that Plato died having heard the right measure, that he died listening to the flute as it should be played. His death would not have been complete had he not heard the correct measure. Thus Plato hears the flute with the proper measure.

Who is this flute-player? We note she was a Thracian. We can remember in The Symposium, when the banquet was about to begin, that a flute-girl entered the room ready to play. The diners at Agathon’s house discuss drinking, as the three old men also do in the early books of The Laws. The guests at Agathon’s table had all been drinking heavily the evening before. So they decide not to drink, or at least not to drink in competition or in excess. If someone might want some wine, that was quite all right, but if he did not, that was all right also. The banquet was convivial, pleasant. Even Socrates had dressed up rather when the speeches began in earnest, the return at the end when Alcibiades unexpectedly roars into the room.

The flute-girls at Plato’s death and at Agathon’s banquet are mindful of the Thracian maidens. The Thracian maidens are those very normal and delightful young women who tell us of philosophy, think of what Socrates does with his days. Aristotle, it will be recalled, remarked that the philosopher Thales proved the usefulness of philosophy by gaining a monopoly on
the oil and wine presses so that when the bumper season arrived, having himself studied all the signs of nature, all the unlearned growers had to pay him handsomely to use his presses. But as he did not want the money, being a philosopher, he was just illustrating that the philosopher was poor because he chose to be, because his time was better spent in other things. The philosopher knew something about music and about business, but he was not a musician or a businessman.

However, when two famous philosophers were walking down the road one day learnedly discussing the stars and other exalted things, one of them fell into a hole that he unfortunately did not see because of his absorption in philosophy. Seeing this, to them, absurd incident, the Thracian maidens began to giggle and laugh at the philosopher. Most of the human race, subsequently, would side with the Thracian maidens. One might suggest from this famous tale, that the Thracian maidens ultimately also needed the measure. She was not unteachable. Philosophy seeks the eminently teachable. Plato himself knew the measure. That is to say, Plato died, to borrow Josef Pieper’s felicitous phrase, “in tune with the world.”

But Plato’s death has a further implication. The flute-girl did, evidently, when taught, catch the measure. She was not unteachable. Philosophy seeks the eminently teachable. Plato himself knew the measure. That is to say, Plato died, to borrow Josef Pieper’s felicitous phrase, “in tune with the world.” Plato did not make the measure. He discovered it. He knew it. Protagoras in a famous phrase had affirmed that “man is the measure of all things.” In his Laws, Plato had argued rather that we are the puppets of God, that our works and days, even our highest human sciences, even politics, are not serious, at least not in comparison with God. “God is the measure of all things” (716). We are to spend our days “singing, dancing, and sacrificing” because this is the only response we can make to the good that is (803).

Thus, when Plato dies, he dies according to a measure that he knew but did not constitute. The Thracian girl picked up a beat that she imperfectly blew into her double-reed flute, but she did not quite know how it worked. Plato taught her the measure. Those who did not know the measure could learn it from the philosopher. The redemption of the flute-girls and the Thracian maidens for philosophy finds its source here, in the measure that Plato in dying did not himself constitute but which he knew and knew could be learned by the flute-girl. The last person who sees Plato alive is the Thracian maiden, as she plays according to the measure he taught her. Her flute is the last thing he listens to. Plato died with philosophy reconciled to the Thracian maidens and the flute girls. The Thracian maiden who played for him did not laugh at him, the philosopher dying. She did not think it mockingly amusing that this dying philosopher should call for her so that he might listen to the flute as he left this world. The philosopher is not laughed at. He is attended to, having learned the measure.

Socrates, as he left this world, himself on his last day, had wondered about music. Before his conversation on immortality in the Phaedo, Socrates confesses that perhaps he had misunderstood the Oracle. Perhaps the Oracle meant that he should actually compose music or poetry, cultivate the arts. So he did set some passages in Aesop’s fables to verse and some hymns to the festival gods. And Cicero also recalled that in his old age, “Socrates learnt to play that favourite instrument of the ancients, the lyre.” Plato realized in The Republic that the only way to counteract Homer would be to write a poetry and a music that out-charmed Homer. Plato’s music, as we learn each time we read him, was beguiling. Even Callicles was trained in his earlier days by reading with amusement the philosophers, so that there seems to be some missing link between the philosopher and the politician. What had gone wrong in the life of the master politician Callicles? He found the image of Socrates in mature age, still conversing with potential phi-
losophers quietly in corners, to be ridiculous and a waste of time. He had lost the charm. Socrates was unintelligible to him, though he sensed him still to be dangerous and thus would not answer his questions. Callicles, the statesman, was unwilling to test his own reasoning. He lacked music. He was unaware of the relation of music and philosophy.

But both the Thracian maidens and Callicles needed to be redeemed by true music and true politics. That is to say, we could not have a city composed only of philosophers, only of shepherds, only of craftsmen, only of politicians, only of flute-girls. Harmony required more. Specialization meant that not everyone could be expert in everything else, that is was all right if everyone did not do everything. The philosopher was a specialist in the whole. It was all right that Plato, the philosopher, did not himself play the flute well, but not all right that he did not know anything about it, did not delight in listening to it. Philosophers enjoy music in part because they know it, in part because they know that life is more than philosophy. All things had their harmony in the philosopher who was to know the parts, even the measure of the laws of music. Plato did not ask for a flute so that he could himself play. As he lay dying, he did not act, he listened, until he heard what was not in tune with the measure. Music and nomos were reconciled. The Thracian maiden played. Plato listened. Plato does not die in silence.

At the end of Symposium, “the sound of the flute is heard” (212). Alcibiades, unlike Callicles, has felt the charm of philosophy all his disordered life, even though he had to shut his ears against it. Astonishingly, he compares Socrates precisely to a flute-player.

And are you not a flute-player? That you are, and a performer far more wonderful than Marsyas. He indeed with instruments used to charm the souls of men by the powers of his breath, and the players of his music do so still: for the melodies of Olympus’ are derived from Marsyas who taught them, and these, whether they are played by a great master or by a miserable flute-girl, have a power which no others have; they alone possess the soul and reveal the wants of those who have need of gods and mysteries, because they are divine. But you produce the same effect with your words only, and do not require the flute; this is the difference between you and him (215).

The melodies of Olympus have a measure. Whether they are played by Marsyas or a miserable flute-girl, they have power. They possess the soul and reveal the “wants of those who have need of gods and mysteries.” Those who have need of gods and mysteries were those who were not the philosophers. The philosopher had no need of being a musician, but he loved music. He had no need of the mysteries and the gods, but he loved them. What was missing in the cosmos was someone to praise what is for what it was, for its own sake.

VI. The words of Socrates, Alcibiades tells us, are like music. They have a divine origin. Chaerephon, we recall, had gone to the Oracle at Delphi. His brother Chaerocrates was at the trial and could testify to it. Alcibiades, whose life Socrates had saved at the Battle of Delium, was the most talented and handsome of all the young men of Athens. Socrates loved him in his potential virtue but not in his corruption. Alcibiades stands at the threshold of ruining the city because he rejects philosophy. He goes on to betray Athens, Sparta, and Persia. He admits that Pericles speaks well, but when Alcibiades heard Socrates, he explained, “I felt as if I could hardly endure the life which I am leading.” Alcibiades realized that if he did not “shut his ears” against the words of Socrates, “and fly as from the voice of a siren, my fate would be like that of others -- he would transfix me, and I should grow old sitting at his feet” (216). Alcibiades does not grow old sitting at Socrates’ feet. Plutarch gives two accounts of Alcibiades’ death (404 B.C.). He is
murdered by darts either because he debauched a maiden or because he betrayed Lacaedaimon and Persia.

Xanthippe, his wife, is not present when Socrates drinks the hemlock, though she has been there in the morning. The potential philosophers and the good jailer are there. Socrates remembers to offer a sacrifice to the God of Healing, for he is being healed in his death. Socrates entrusts this sacrificial mission to his old friend Crito, who could not get him out of jail with his money because Socrates had forbidden him. We realize already at the banquet of Agathon (415 BC), however, that Socrates, in undergoing a more severe test than that of death, will not be corrupted by Alcibiades. He will not do wrong for the sake either of Callicles’ demos or Alcibiades’ own ambitions, or beauty or love, or pleasure, or popularity.

Why must Alcibiades at the banquet close his ears to the siren voice of Socrates? “For he makes me confess that I ought not to live as I do, neglecting the wants of my own soul, and busying myself with the he concerns of the Athenians; therefore I hold my ears and tear myself away from him”. Alcibiades knows perfectly well why he acts as he does. In this explanation he is more revealing than Callicles, though both of them do the same thing in refusing to listen to Socrates. “For I know that I cannot answer him or say that I ought not to do as he bids, but when I leave his presence the love of popularity gets the better of me. And therefore I run away and fly from him...” (216). Alcibiades takes the only escape possible. He refuses to listen and he immediately seeks to corrupt Socrates so that Socrates will not be superior to him in virtue.

When Alcibiades fails, he admits to the others that “I could not help wondering at his natural temperance and self-restraint and manliness”. Alcibiades wonders about this virtue, but to no avail. Aristotle had said that wonder was the beginning of philosophy. Socrates, in fact, not Alcibiades, was the only one “with any real powers of enjoyment” (219). Alcibiades is thus the model of the opposite of the philosopher-king, more so than Callicles who is not a philosopher. Alcibiades not merely refuses to listen to argument. He also takes positive steps not to know. He does everything in his power not to acknowledge that he is wrong, even though he does know it. He tries to corrupt the only source of virtue he admires so that he will have no model testifying to his corruption.

The worst tyrant, as we recall from Book One of The Republic, was the one who did evil or whatever else he wanted. But this same tyrant not merely wanted to do evil or what he wanted, he also wanted to be praised by everyone for what he did. This praise is crucial, for it implies that even evil needs rational approbation. Otherwise, as Socrates shows us in The Gorgias, the tyrant is utterly alone and in the worst possible position. The ring of Gyges, the original invisible man who could do what he wanted if only he were not seen, corrupted also the people in defiling the shepherd who found the ring and corruptly became a king. In the Gorgias, the worst tyrant is the one who thinks that to do evil is better than to suffer it. He is the one who refuses punishment for his evil rather than freely to accept it and therefore acknowledge a good he did not make.

VII. At the end of Alcibiades I, Alcibiades seems to have decided to follow Socrates; he has shown that he could follow the highest arguments of virtue posed by the philosopher. “I shall begin at this moment to take trouble over justice” Alcibiades explains. To this happy thought, Socrates responds, “And I would wish you to continue doing so. Yet, I stand in dread, not because I do not have trust in your nature, but rather because, seeing the strength of the city, I fear that it will overcome both me and you” (135). In a sense, we have here the preview of the young Augustine, the two loves and the two cities. Socrates lived a private life because he expected he would have been killed long ago if he did not. However ready for death he was, he did not seek it, but suffered it if it came along. The Symposium revealed...
that Alcibiades, not Socrates, was the one seeking the beloved. What ultimately attracted Alcibiades, in spite of himself, was philosophy, the love of wisdom and truth. Socrates, for his part, realized that Alcibiades could also corrupt him, the philosopher, as well as himself. How? Because of another love, the love that Alcibiades confessed that he was attracted to whenever he left Socrates’ presence. Politics, when it did not feel the charm of philosophy, remained the most serious opponent to philosophy.

If Socrates is the real flute-player, as Alcibiades said, is it not of some interest that Plato dies alone, in old age, of a natural death, with the sole consolation of a flute player, a Thracian maiden who does not know the measure? “God is the measure of all things” (716). Plato knew the nomos. His death was in tune with everything that was in the cosmos, the measure. Plutarch said that, as a young man, Alcibiades “obeyed all his masters fairly well, but refused to learn upon the flute, as a sordid thing...” If we recall the Thracian maiden who played the flute for Plato when he showed her the measure, on the evening of the day on which he died, isn’t that refusal of Alcibiades an extraordinary thing? In the Crito, Crito himself remarked that Socrates could also have been exiled to Thessaly, another wild place like Thrace. Crito’s friends there would give Socrates complete protection and there they would make much of the philosopher. But of course, Socrates realized that in a Thrace or a Thessaly, the philosopher would be merely an oddity, a show-piece. He would have had no one with whom to speak. Socrates tells Crito that their long years of “serious discussion” have taught them both that “to do wrong is in every sense bad and dishonourable for the person who does it” (49).

In his last words in The Apology, Socrates spoke of death, of going to the Isles of the Blessed, where he would meet the gods and the heroes, where he would even meet Homer; the old quarrel between poetry and philosophy could be resolved. Even Socrates wanted to continue his conversation beyond death to find out who really is wise. When Plato dies, however, he does not, like Socrates, seem to anticipate this further conversation. What he seems to anticipate rather is the music, that is, the praise. We should spend our lives “singing, dancing, and sacrificing” (803). Plato does not, like Socrates, seek among the gods and heroes to find him who is “really wise” and him who “only thinks that he is” (42). Plato understood the Alcibiades who refused to learn the flute. Plato did not refuse to listen to Socrates, the master flute-player.

Plato taught the Thracian maiden the nomos, the measure. Plato knew the flute. He taught her this measure the evening he died. The Thracian maiden did not laugh at him. He heard her play the flute. He knew the measure, that he was not the measure himself. “God is the measure of all things” (716). The Thracian maiden learned the measure. Philosophy, poetry, and politics are reconciled. In the Academy of Plato, we can still catch strains of the measure, even in any existing city, but only if we worry, like Socrates, about the demos, about the love that has no order.

In Book Ten of The Republic, after mentioning the “old quarrel between philosophy and poetry”, Socrates admits that

“If poetry directed to pleasure and imitation have any argument to give showing that they should be in a city with good laws, we should be delighted to receive them back from exile, since we are aware that we ourselves are charmed by them. But it isn’t holy to betray what seems to be the truth. Aren’t you, too, my friend (Glaucon), charmed by it, especially when you contemplate it...”

“Very much so.”

“Isn’t it just for it to come back in this way -- when it has made an apology in lyrics or some other meter?” (607)

Eric Voegelin was charmed by the death of Plato. Philosophy, Voegelin thought, had fled to the Academy -- Plato’s Academy not ours -- wherein poetry and the pleasure of music are received back no longer tainted by the polis using
them for its own purposes. The apology in lyrics and in meter, in measure, are present in the music of the Thracian maiden playing the flute with the nomos that the dying Plato gave her. Plato died in full tune with the world and with its Measure.

VIII. A friend of mine happened to be in the Stanford Chapel at the Memorial Service of Eric Voegelin. My friend did not know who Voegelin was at the time, but he made a tape of this moving service. At this world-famous university only about forty people attended the service for Voegelin. Philosophy has fled even the academy. Voegelin seems to have chosen the music, Schubert, and the readings, from Ezekiel, from the First Letter of John, and from the Gospel of John. In his lovely eulogy of Voegelin, Ellis Sandoz remarked that the last time he saw Voegelin, a couple of months before he died, he had just ordered a new edition of Shakespeare’s works, as the one he had been using was worn out. Voegelin tried to read the complete works of Shakespeare every year. The day before he died (January 18, 1985), Voegelin spent his time correcting some page proofs of his essay, “Quod Deus Dicitur”, a proposition, he remarked, whose “specific form” comes from Thomas Aquinas. The very last word Voegelin ever wrote was “Plato.”

On the day of Voegelin’s death, a Psalm was read as he passed into unconsciousness. The Psalm was the Twenty-fifth. “Oh, keep my soul, O Lord, and deliver me: let me not be ashamed, for I put my trust in Thee.” Voegelin died peacefully while this Psalm was being read. As his wife was too weak and anxious, the Psalm was read to Voegelin by his American Indian housekeeper whose name was, with splendid paradox, Hiawatha.

All true philosophers, when they die, die the same death. All true philosophers when they die, die in the same city.

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