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Desire Under the Plane Tree: The Fallacy of the Non-Lover and the Embodiment of $EP\Omega TA\Sigma$ in Plato's *Phaedrus*

Socrates: But, my dear Phaedrus, I shall make myself ridiculous if I, a mere amateur, try without preparation to speak on the same subject in competition with a master of his art.

Phaedrus: Now listen to me. Stop trying to fool me; for I can say something which will force you to speak.

- S: Then pray don't say it.
- P: Yes, but I will. And my saying shall be an oath. I swear to you—by what god? By this plane tree? I take my solemn oath that unless you produce the discourse in the very presence of this plane tree, I will never read you another or tell you of another.
- S: You wretch! How well you found out how to make a lover of discourse do your will!
- P: Then why do you try to get out of it?
- S: I won't any more, since you have taken this oath; for how could I give up such pleasures? ¹

To begin a discussion of the *Phaedrus* with this scene in mind is to begin with two main ideas: Socrates as a "lover of discourse" and the plane tree as a form of divinity. Interlocutor Phaedrus thinks he knows exactly how to compel Socrates to speak, and despite the latter's coyness on the subject, he readily admits that his most ardent wish is always to participate in investigative speech with other lovers of rhetoric. This is an end Socrates must certainly have in mind as he gives his monologue, since Phaedrus too is a lover of great speeches and discussion must follow. Stanley Rosen, in The Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry, tells us of the relationship between the speakers that "[their] connection turns upon Έρωτας. However, Socrates does not claim to be in love with Phaedrus, as he does with Alcibiades; nor is it ever suggested that Phaedrus loves Socrates. The point is that Socrates and Phaedrus share a love for speeches."² The task that Phaedrus gives Socrates in the scene above is to make a speech that involves singing the praises the non-lover. Socrates clearly find this to be a shameful undertaking since he intends to cover his head while he speaks.³, it becomes apparent that he feels that it is deeply inappropriate to undertake the task Phaedrus has set for him. We see this more clearly when Socrates begins his revision of Lysias's speech not with an actual non-lover, but with a lover who is disguised as a non-lover. In fact, in the course of the dialogue, Socrates will never grant the existence of a true non-lover, even in the speech that he cunningly attributes to a lover in disguise and later repudiates as an offense to the gods.

The central concern of this paper is to examine the relationship between Socrates's hesitation toward creating a characterization of a non-lover and his treatment of the epistemic possibilities of Έρωτας regarding the philosopher's pursuit of truth. I intend to show that the unique setting and imagery of the *Phaedrus*, particularly the scene in which Phaedrus equates the plane tree with a god, are vital elements of the thematic content of the dialogue as a whole with regard to the relationship between Socrates's description of the internal constitution of the individual philosophic soul and Plato's trademark iconoclasm, particularly when one takes into account the

reasons for Socrates's frequent prevarications regarding the existence of a non-lover within the dialogue.

The *Phaedrus*, in distinction from Plato's other works, is situated outside the city, in a place of surpassing beauty. The following is the description Socrates gives of the environment: "By Hera, it is a charming resting place. For this plane tree is very spreading and lofty, and the tall and shady willow is very beautiful, and it is in full bloom, so as to make the place most fragrant; then, too, the spring is very pretty as it flows under the plane tree, and its water is very cool, to judge by my foot." Kenneth Dorter interprets these remarks as evidence of Socrates's initial state of sobriety, represented by his oath to Hera and his methodical use of his senses to examine and describe the landscape in discursive detail. Dorter explains that Socrates's behavior upon reaching the resting place is indicative of a kind of "sober omen-reading" that will later come to be contrasted with divinely inspired madness and that his placidity is further underscored by his oath: "Socrates' initial unproductive sobriety explains his unusual oath—'By Hera'. Hera is later called the patroness deity of kingliness (253b1-2)—the identifying attribute of the sober and unphilosophical speech writers (266c6)...Socrates' oath by Hera was the initial intimation of his sober state." Translator Stephen Scully adds that the physical qualities of the grove in which the dialogue takes place "[appear] to provide a physical and linguistic preparation for central visionary and philosophical themes which take place within the grove." Dorter too conceives of the imagery of the dialogue as central to the content, asserting that "if it can be shown that the action or imagery of a dialogue is so consistent that it discloses a distinct pattern too structured to be undesigned, and that this pattern illuminates the speeches so as to reveal significant aspects and relationships that would otherwise have gone unnoticed, it would suggest that these elements were meant to be given serious attention."8

It is worth, then, remarking on the distinctive nature of this setting within the corpus of Plato's work, since rarely is a dialogue's physical environment rendered so vividly present as to almost become one of the interlocutors itself. G. R. F. Ferrari, in *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus*, remarks that when the two speakers arrive in the grove, "topography becomes the topic of conversation in a highly obtrusive manner...in short, what is particularly striking about this dialogue is that the background will not stay where it belongs. It becomes a prominent topic of discussion and a direct cause of the conversational action."

This necessary connection between the setting and the content of the dialogue is essential to grasping the relationship of erotic madness and calm rationality that Stanley Rosen considers to be "the distinguishing mark of Plato's conception of philosophy": "the peak of sobriety is at once the peak of madness." Dorter tells us that Lysias's speech "mark[s] the beginning of Socrates' transformation within the dialogue from an embodiment of sobriety to an embodiment of philosophy" and that "because philosophy is a synthesis between sobriety and passion, Socrates must first experience the other component, passion." For the *Phaedrus* to have the necessary dialectic (and to show how this relationship leads the soul toward philosophy), Socrates will have to experience both extremes and finally mediate the two in a symbiotic relationship that allows for a sort of embedded dialogue on a philosophical topic—in this case, the discussion concerning the art of rhetoric in the third "section" of the dialogue. Interestingly, in this final section, this mediation of sobriety and passion yields the insight that the point of speech is to guide the soul. I will further discuss this latter observation in a later section of this essay.

The two men have come to the place described above in order that Phaedrus might recount the recent speech made by the famous orator, Lysias, to Socrates. The speech praises the virtues of non-lovers and requests that boys bestow sexual favors on calm, rational non-lovers rather than passionate, unpredictable lovers. Socrates criticizes Lysias's speech and is then compelled by Phaedrus to compose his own in the excerpt I have taken for my starting point. In this speech, Socrates uses a lover disguised as a non-lover for his point of departure and breaks off before he discusses an actual non-lover. Socrates moves quickly toward a passionate feeling that inspires

and informs his first speech concerning the lover and away from his merely descriptive orientation toward sense-phenomena. He mentions that he begins to move in the direction of poetry as he speaks of the lover's capacities. ¹⁶ It is vital to note again that he begins his speech after admitting that he is a "lover of discourse" when Phaedrus compels him to speak by swearing on the plane tree.

The plane tree itself is of great significance, since it was associated with Dionysus in antiquity. Traditional interpretations of the plane tree's relevance usually focus on the the plane tree as Plato's insertion of himself into the dialogue, 17 which is a possibility I acknowledge, but I find the plane tree's identification with Dionysus more compelling in the light of Socrates-aslover and his later discussion of souls in the afterlife and their capacity to attain sight of the highest virtues while following the gods. This interpretation of the plane tree's symbolism is found in Oxford Classical Dictionary by way of Dorter's essay: "it is appropriate that the oath by which Phaedrus compels Socrates to deliver his first speech is sworn by the plane tree, [for] the plane tree was identified with Dionysus, and it is to it that his epithets Dendrites and Endendros refer." There is additional evidence for this view in Sir James Frazer's indispensable work, *The* Golden Bough, where there is an account of Dionysus as "a god of trees in general." Frazer additionally recounts the episode "at Magnesia in Maeander [where] an image of Dionysus is said to have been found in a plane-tree which had been broken by the wind."²⁰ The "appropriate" nature of the oath underscores the relationship between the content of Socrates's speech, his method of articulating himself, and the representative imagery in his immediate surroundings. The entity that Phaedrus has sworn upon, in this interpretation, is affiliated with a god closely associated with madness, and Socrates's oath and subsequent speech therefore represent the movement toward madness and Έρωτας and away from strict clear-headedness. He is retracing the path of dialectical mediation by which the soul becomes a philosopher—the path that he will later describe in his palinode on the task of the soul in the afterlife.

To return to the scene I have taken for my point of departure, it is worth noting that Phaedrus is less than impressed with the lack of conclusion to Socrates's speech, after the latter abruptly abandons his rhetorical pursuit.²¹ The interlocutor wants to hear Socrates give the praises of the non-lover, but the latter resists, saying: "Did you not notice, my friend, that I am already speaking in hexameters, not mere dithyrambics, even though I am finding fault with the lover? But if I begin to praise the non-lover, what kind of hymn do you suppose I shall raise? I shall surely be possessed of the nymphs to whom you purposely exposed me."²² Upon saying this, Socrates attempts to leave the grove where he is speaking with Phaedrus, but he is recalled, or rather, he is turned back.²³ It has occurred to him, he says, that his speech was blasphemous, for he was speaking against $E\rho\omega\tau\alpha\varsigma$, the divine embodiment of desire.²⁴ Socrates's speech was in fact a speech in which the lover is disguised as a non-lover, which could be a possible blasphemy to $E\rho\omega\tau\alpha\varsigma$ in itself, but simply speaking of the lover cannot, in itself, be considered a sin. What then accounts for the appearance of Socrates's daimon and his subsequent guilt at blaspheming $E\rho\omega\tau\alpha\varsigma$?

When Socrates is recalled by his daimon after breaking off his first speech, he returns and insists upon fixing the harm done.²⁵ He proceeds to detail the movement of the soul in the afterlife in a parable that illustrates the soul as a chariot pulled by two horses—a white horse, which is representative of modesty and virtue, and a black horse, which is best characterized as a lusty, ill-tempered beast intent on the basest gratifications.²⁶ Despite the uncomfortable dialectic of the two horses, the soul manages to follow the Greek divinities ever upward toward the True, but the soul's ability to master both horses and its choice of which individual divinity to follow affect how much a share of the True and Beautiful it might glimpse.²⁷ Because of the dualism represented by the two horses, it is clear that, for Socrates, each human being has both an element

of erotic madness and an element of restraint and grace in his or her soul, regardless of which particular divinity the soul pursues. Thus, we see that despite the variability of whatever thing or idea is pursued, no human being is capable of being broadly classified as a non-lover (since each of us contains both horses), and it would be duplicitous to refuse to see the soul's "black horse" and thus deny the very element of the human being that encourages and sustains the pursuit of truth.

In Socrates's palinode, it cannot be stressed enough that, no matter how complex or confused our nature, man's ultimate fealty is to the Good. Every chariot must follow some god, and the gods are representative of virtues and point beyond themselves to these divine categories subsumed under a unified totality (a function analogous to that of the beloved on the Earthly plane); every human soul yearns for the beauty they glimpsed in the afterlife, where they were once guided by the god or goddess and his or her attendant virtue. Those who follow Zeus fly highest, spend the most time gazing at Truth, and become philosophers in life. Significantly, the soul that would follow Zeus must be of such a composition that the two warring elements, if not harmonized, are at least controlled in such a way that the chariot is capable of reaching the loftiest spaces. It may fairly be argued, then, that it is the composition of a particular soul that determines the divinity chosen, and the reward given to the philosopher is not purely contingent upon the god's bestowal of some blessing. Rather, the human agency in controlling the contradictory elements of its soul is what determines its success. For a philosopher, the greatest sin would be to deny this dualism of the soul and thus follow instead one of the lesser deities out of an overattachment to either sobriety or erotic pleasure.

Acknowledgement of dualism and agency in the chariot parable reveals two further problems. The first takes up the endowment of the gods with human attributes and emotions. This is misleading insofar as the dialectic of contradictory elements within the human soul is absolutely necessary for the pursuit of Truth; the lesser gods, however, represent discrete single virtues. Moreover, to follow a god with lesser unity than Zeus would spell the disharmonic destruction of the philosophic soul. Second, there is little hope for other souls regarding the potential to become philosophers if the idea persists that each god has some ability to enhance specific elements of life and is the ideal of particular unmixed virtues. Here the dialogue takes on an added urgency: what might become of Lysias and Isocrates if Phaedrus and Socrates fail to mold them in the image of philosophic unity? If Lysias and Isocrates choose instead to follow a lesser deity, and if Phaedrus and Socrates fail to correct them, do the philosophers not thus warp the souls of their young lovers by not compelling them to strive for the utmost unity, both within their own breasts and with regard to the ultimate Good?

For Plato, only by denying all representations and embracing his or her innately felt desire for Beauty can a philosopher ascend to the Good. The goal of the *Phaedrus* as a whole is to show that the particular personification of divinity becomes troublesome for the human mind, resulting not in greater striving for the Good, but in a mistaken idea of single reified Truths (as embodied by the lesser gods). In this sense, even Zeus is problematic, since it is the philosopher's *orientation* toward unity and harmony that is significant for his success in obtaining a share of the Good, not his subsequent choice to follow Zeus. The noble of mind will follow Zeus, but nobility of mind is not predicated on that initial choice; it must precede it. When one believes that his potential for seeing the Truth is predicated on an embodiment of virtues, even an embodiment of unity such as Zeus, the universality of the Good cannot be fully comprehended and the dualism within the human soul loses its necessary primacy. Thus, the educative effects of the madness experience are thwarted by placing undue emphasis on false ideas of non-dialectical divine embodiments of human virtues which could not effectively stand on their own in the world of human beings (humanity is not purely anything, whether simply warlike or simply peaceful).

Socrates declares no radical atheism; his interest in renouncing the gods is deeper than that, for only through the repudiation of the particular can the wholeness of the human being—and

thus the possibility of knowing the Good—be glimpsed. The man-as-lover must take care not to locate the fulfillment of his desire in something false or singular in the sphere of ideas, especially in a particular relationship to a god, like that of Odysseus to Athena, for it is easier and more dangerous to be misled in the realm of intellection than the field of earthly bodies. ²⁹ When a human intelligence is able to separate its feeling of $E\rho\omega\tau\alpha\zeta$ from the image of a divinity and locate its soul in its own erotic orientation toward the Beautiful and desire for harmony within itself (and here we can see as well the blasphemy of robbing the embodiment of $E\rho\omega\tau\alpha\zeta$ of his particular, isolated realm and placing $E\rho\omega\tau\alpha\zeta$ squarely in the multifarious constitution of the human being), the soul may achieve a greater share of the Good than it would by following a content-specific deification of virtue, misled by the false clarity and artificial intelligibility of its attendant representation.

The appearance of Socrates's daimon becomes explicable when considering the movement of the dialogue as a whole. Beginning from a place of mental quietude and stoic observation before ascending to Dionysian heights, Socrates, in his first speech, feels that he has done an injustice to human beings as potential lovers of wisdom in praising the concealed lover. The true philosopher does not deny his erotic impulses but rather cultivates temperance in order to guide those impulses and thus order his soul. This so he may best position himself to encourage his young lovers to harmonize their own souls and so obtain to the Good in the afterlife. It might well be remarked that in this sense of a dialectic between passion and stoic placidity, qualities of the nonlover also have their importance, insofar as there must be an idea of a benefit conferred upon the beloved. This benefit is to be the transformation of a boy into a lover of wisdom, which is what Socrates has in mind when he details the virtues that the followers of each principal Greek god pursue and inculcate in their beloveds: the followers "proceed in the manner of their god and search for the beloved whose nature resembles their god; when they acquire him they themselves imitate the god and persuade and discipline the darling, leading him into the service and ways of the god, according to each one's ability."³⁰ Philosophers seek to instill the highest virtues in their already nobly-disposed beloveds, and so the mutual delight in the life of the mind is able to grow and a benefit is conferred upon both by virtue of the older man's greatness of soul. Because of the lofty nature of this relationship, the real delight is found in discourse and genuine speeches, and here we may see the significance of the path Socrates has taken in the course of the dialogue as well as its culmination in the final interchange with Phaedrus. Socrates had to undergo mediation between sobriety and passion and avoid blaspheming the human being-as-lover in order to guide his fellow lover of discourse to conversation of higher ideals. It is worth remembering that both men have young lovers in whom Socrates sees much potential, so there are more souls than two hanging in the balance of Socrates's transformation. 31 The imagery of the dialogue makes explicit this movement through the direct speech of the characters, acting as a kind of interlocutor in itself—to strengthen the claim, one might describe the imagery as a poetic daimon of Plato's invention.³²

Socrates's preliminary description of the scenery and its subsequent effect on him have thus two functions: first, these moments are models for how the passionate element may be integrated with the rational element in the soul of the philosopher; second, they indicate how appearance may be utilized and ultimately transcended in the pursuit of Truth. I do not think it such a bold assertion to say that, set apart as it is by means of its imposing scenery, seriousness in tone, and wide-ranging discursive perambulations, the *Phaedrus* contains the most powerful statement of what is at stake in the necessary connection between a human being's interior unity and the desire for truth beyond image and representation in the entirety of Plato's works.

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¹ Harold North Fowler, trans., *Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 236d–e. I chose to use this translation because it adheres most closely to the original Greek text and brings to light Phaedrus's equation of the plane tree with a god, or θεός.

² Stanley Rosen, *The Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry: Studies in Ancient Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 81.

³ Plato, 237a4.

⁴ "Now there was once upon a time a boy, or rather a stripling, of great beauty: and he had many lovers. And among these was one of peculiar craftiness, who was as much in love with the boy as anyone, but had made him believe that he was not in love." Ibid., 237b2–7. The parallel between Socrates's covering of his head and the disguise taken by the lover should be obvious.

⁵ Ibid., 230b2–6.

⁶ Kenneth Dorter. "Imagery and Philosophy in Plato's Phaedrus," *JOURNAL OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY* 9, no. 3 (July 1971): 281.

⁷ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Stephen Scully (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2003). This statement can be found in the appended glossary, p. 127. Scully, in his introduction of the same edition, reminds readers that "many features of the grove (without the statues of the gods) will also re-appear in the form of the Epicurean garden, the place of retreat and philosophical tranquility where true fellowship and discourse can occur away from the distractions of city life" (Introduction, viii).

⁸ Dorter, 279.

⁹ G.R.F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 3–4.

¹⁰ Rosen, 81.

¹¹ Dorter, 281.

¹² Plato, 259e1-278b4.

¹³ Ibid., 271c10.

¹⁴ Ibid., 230e6–234c5.

¹⁵ Ibid., 234c6–237b1.

¹⁶ Ibid., 241e1–4.

¹⁷ For an instance of this interpretation, see Ove Hansen, "Plato and Plane-Trees in the Folk-Lore of the Konya Plain," *Hermes* 122, no. 3 (1994): 365–66.

¹⁸ Dorter, 282.

¹⁹ James G Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963). From chapter XLIII, p. 449.

²⁰ Ibid., 449.

²¹ Plato, 241d3–8.

²² Ibid., 241e2.

²³ Ibid., 242b6–242c9.

²⁴ Ibid., 234d4.

²⁵ Ibid., 241d2–243e8.

²⁶ Ibid., 246a3–247c2.

²⁷ Ibid., 252c2–253c7.

²⁸ Ibid., 243e9–257b6.

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²⁹ Ibid., 279a4–279b3. This is made clear in the discussion of Isocrates in the conclusion, where Socrates seems to have no compunctions about declaring Isocrates to be his favorite.

³⁰ Ibid., 253b5–9.

³¹ There are numerous occasions on which Socrates either expresses concern for or alludes to Phaedrus's need for some guidance as well. See 257a3–b6 and 278b5–279b5 for two salient examples.

³² This claim would be able to include a double-meaning for the plane-tree, since both its association with Dionysus and with Plato could easily hold true and would lend deeper significance to the meaning of the dialogue's physical environment.