

Poetry, Philosophy, and Madness in Plato

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λόγου δ' ἀρχὴ οὐ λόγος, ἀλλὰ τι κρεῖττον.

[the starting-point of reason is not reason but something superior].

Aristotle: *Eudemian Ethics* 1248a

Plato's unease with the (mimetic) poets is well-known from his expulsion of them from his city-state in *The Republic*,¹ where they embody the very inversion of philosophical self-understanding. Philosophy – which is guided by reason (λόγος), wisdom (σοφία), and self-control (σωφροσύνη) – is here (and elsewhere in his works) seen to find itself in the highest opposition to poetry inasmuch the latter dangerously provokes desire (ἔρως), pleasure (ἡδονή), and madness (μανία). Here philosophy is understood as a praxis of reason, establishing an ideal, active, and self-determined homogeneity opposed to poetry, understood as an illusory, passive, and alienated heterogeneity.

However, poetry is more positively presented in *Phaedrus* (and to some extent in *Ion*). Things seem to have been turned upside-down, since philosophy now is presented as a twin brother to poetry, as both originate from god given madness. Poetry is here – in contrast to *The Republic*, where poetry is analyzed as a skill or insight (τέχνη) – understood as an ecstatic form of inspired madness (μανία or ἐνθουσιασμός).² In its common origin with poetry,

¹ I would wholeheartedly like to thank Jørgen Hass and Marcel Lysgaard for invaluable suggestions, corrections, and for having taken the time to discuss these issues with me.

² For the question of madness as well as the poetic and philosophical madness in Ancient Greek culture, cf.

E. N. Tigersted, "*Furor Poeticus: Poetic Inspiration in Greek Literature before Democritus and Plato*" (*Journal of the History of Ideas* 31, 1970), A. Delatte, "Les conceptions de l'enthousiasme chez les philosophes présocratiques" (*L'Antiquité Classique* 3, 1934), E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), Alain Billault, "La folie poétique: remarques sur les conceptions grecques de l'inspiration" (*BAGB* 4, 2002), Paul Vicaire, "Les Grecs et le mystère de l'inspiration poétique" (*Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé*, 1963), J. L. Calvo Martínez, "Sobre la mania y el entusiasmo" (*Emerita* 41, 1973), Roberto Velardi, *Enthousiasmos: possessione rituale e teoria della comunicazione poetica in Platone* (Rome: Ateneo, 1989), Fabio Massimo Giuliano, "L'enthousiasmos dello poeta filosofo tra Parmenide e Platone" (*Studi di Let-*

philosophy is no longer adequately understood as reason (λόγος), knowledge (νοῦς), and self-control (σωφροσύνη). Unlike *The Republic*, *Phaedrus* demonstrates how philosophy would be barren and epistemologically impotent without inspiration (ἐνθουσιασμός) and this standing-outside (ἐξιστάμενος), into which desire (ἔρως), madness (μανία), and senselessness (ἔκφρων, ἄφρων, and παράνοια) throw it. Like poetry, philosophy now seems to be an irrational, heterogeneous, and passive activity.

The only thing separating the poet and philosopher is actually, according to Socrates, that the philosopher in contrast to the poet is able to explain and account for the knowledge produced (cf. *Phaedrus* 278d). There seems to be a smoldering self-contradiction at work in Plato, as the positive judgement of the divine madness (characterizing the lover and the poet, but also the philosopher's love for knowledge) runs counter to his critique of madness in other dialogues, where he sharply distinguishes rational philosophy from the irrational madness and poetry. Unlike Martha Nussbaum (cf. *The Fragility of Goodness* 200-234), who suggests that Plato's apparent self-contradiction (to some degree) might be explained as an expression of a change in Plato's perception of love and desire (because he in the meantime got to know the nature of love the better through his new love affair with Dion), we insist that it is no worldly coincidence, but rather a metaphysical necessity that occasions the aporia. Reluctantly, Plato has to acknowledge that the philosophical ideal of a self-determined, homogeneous, and dispassionate λόγος is insufficient. Not only for the activity and cognitive drive of philosophy, but also for the cognitive and epistemological leaps of philosophy. If philosophy pursues a new and unforeseen cognition, it must exceed the jurisdiction of λόγος. Thinking is not merely active, homogeneous, and logical, but also poetic, heterogeneous, and erotic, that is to say, creative, passively receptive and transcendent. In other words, genuine thinking is able to know what it could not foresee or calculate in advance from preceding hermeneutic or logical paradigms.

teratura Greca 1997, 137-179), Ruth Padel, *Whom Gods Destroy: Elements of Greek and Tragic Madness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), Bernard C. Dietrich, "Divine Madness and Conflict at Delphi" (*Kernos* 5, 1992), and J. D. Moore, "The Philosopher's Frenzy" (*Mnemosyne* 22, 1969).

To put it differently, the unease and ambivalence towards poetry and madness disclose an uncanny unease and ambivalence within philosophy itself, within the very ground and self-understanding of philosophy.³ In sum:

³ The ambiguity of madness points to poetry as a kind of φάρμακον in its relationship with philosophy. In the essay "Plato's Pharmacy" (1968), which constitutes one of the absolute zeniths of Jacques Derrida's early works, he analyzes the problematics of writing in Plato's *Phaedrus*. In this dialogue writing is described as a φάρμακον, i.e., as 'poison' (cf. *Phaedrus* 274e and 275a), corrupting memory, which now is displaced into something exterior and alien. Memory no longer interiorizes things in the recollection, but displaces them in the exteriority of writing. This weakens memory, Socrates claims (275a), as it becomes dependent on something outside itself, namely the exterior, alien, and lifeless writings. Writing is also characterized as 'poison' (φάρμακον) in relation to speech, which (unlike writing) secures the self-presence and self-authorization of the mind. In writing, which is exterior and lifeless in relation to living speech, we lose ourselves – just like the father, who loses his authority and power over the bastard, who is self-willed, disobedient, and headstrong (yet also powerless in the absence of the father). Speech obeys its origin, i.e., the authority of the mind, whereby it secures an intentional presence and living interiority, which it loyally mirrors; writing is, in contrast, exterior, without a master, playful, and lifeless. Nonetheless, φάρμακον also means 'medicine' in Greek. For Derrida, the conspicuous equivocality of the word represents an equivocality of writing as 'poison' (φάρμακον), for the word could just as well be translated as 'medicine' (if one leaves the context out of account). This equivocality of the status of writing is conveyed by the fact that the 'good' memory, i.e., the mind's own recollection – contrasted with the 'bad' memory of writing – is actually described by Socrates as writing inscribed in the mind: "The word which is *written* with intelligence in the mind of the learner" (276a; my emphasis). Writing is poison and medicine at one and the same time. On the one hand, it is a threat and undermines the intentional presence of the mind and the authentic and self-present speech. On the other hand, it is an indispensable means to maintain this presence that otherwise would be gone forever in the moment it uttered itself. This ambivalence is clearly expressed in Socrates's image of the originator of speech or writing as a farmer, who must find a suitable place to sow his seed: "Then he will not, when in earnest, *write in water* (ἐν ὕδατι γράψει), sowing them through a pen with words which cannot defend themselves by argument and cannot teach the truth effectively" (276c; translation modified). For the problem with this image is that the description of the alleged evanescence of writing ("write in water") applies much better to speech than writing: Where speech disappears the moment it is uttered, writing achieves a permanency, transcending the transient, present now. On the one hand, writing is marginalized as a φάρμακον alien and exterior to the philosophical position, to knowledge, and to the intentional self-presence of the mind; on the other hand, this φάρμακον is installed within the philosophical activity and method itself – for example in *Critias*, where the philosophical prayer to the gods goes as follows: "we pray that he will grant to us that medicine (φάρμακον) which of all medicines (φαρμάκων), is the most perfect and most good, even knowledge (ἐπιστήμην)" (106b). According to Derrida, this means that Plato presents "The philosophical, epistemic order of *logos* as an antidote, as a force inscribed within the general alogical economy of the *pharmakon*" (*Dissemination* 124). This self-contradiction is, according to Derrida, not coincidental, but rather an expression of the fact that there is no absolute and immediate self-presence, which is not always already marked and mediated by the characteristics belonging to writing (exteriorization, iterability, permanency, the trace, differentiation, etc.). In like manner, I will argue that Plato's ambivalent relation to the madness of poetry signifies a similar contamination of philosophy, which neces-

The thesis for the following is therefore that philosophy at one and the same time has to posit the irrational poetry as its complete contrast, its negative, and to recognize it as the actual condition for the possibility of the emergence of philosophy to start with.

I. The old Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry

In his showdown with poetry in *The Republic* – or to be more precise, the poetry which is mimetic (X.595a) – Socrates mentions the old antagonism between poetry and philosophy: “there is from of old a quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (X.607b). Apparently, there is a fundamental disagreement or clash of interest, which, in effect, means that poetry becomes the very inversion of philosophical self-understanding. On the other hand, the poets ridicule the philosophers as “those who are too wise for their own good” (X.607c). Moreover, the philosopher is compared to a “yelping hound barking at her master” who is “mighty in the idle babble of fools” (*ibid.*). In the *Laws*, the Athenian stranger likewise confirms how the poets offend the philosophers by comparing them to “dogs howling at the moon” (XII.967c). According to the poets, the philosophers count as thoughtless, mad dogs, excelling in empty speech (κενεαλογία) among empty-minded or senseless people (ἄφρονων, *The Republic* X.607b). The poets themselves clearly voice this old conflict (*The Republic* 607c) with the philosophers, whom they accuse of being morally, politically, and culturally subversive as well as of excelling in figments of the imagination and sheer, empty abstractions. All in all qualifying them as madmen.

However, on philosophy’s side, the Athenian stranger makes it clear that these defamations are nothing but foolish or crazy assertions (*Laws* XII.967c).

The antagonism seems absolute and mutual. There is an interesting symmetry in this strife with the poets accusing the philosophers of madness; for the philosophers resolutely returns the insanity indictment. The philosopher (here in the guise of Socrates) makes fun of the rhapsodist (a professional reciter and interpreter of Homeric poetry) in the dialogue *Ion*, where the

sarily must marginalize it while it also, at the same time, reluctantly has to recognize it as its actual condition for existing.

title character is said to be out of himself, mad, during his performance (535d). The rhapsodist's enthusiastic performance – which equals the poet's enthusiastic and mad moment of creation, where a god takes possession of him, and which likewise equals the rapture and ecstasy that the rhapsodist's performance releases in the audience – takes place without his knowing so.⁴ In a paradoxical manner, the rhapsodist is – like the poet in the moment of creation – a passive spectator to his own performance or production. He is out of himself in the divine rapture or transportation which means that he – in artistic performance – neither can claim possession of genuine knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), insight or technical skill (τέχνη), nor intellect (νοῦς).

As a consequence, the poet and the philosopher stubbornly confront each other in this old quarrel, where each accuses the other of being mad.

The ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy is therefore a quarrel between twin-brothers, who are disgusted and drawn to each other as both partake in a madness which threatens to dissolve them anytime, but which reversely also is constitutive for them as their actual condition of existing (as we shall see).

II. *The destructive Madness of Love and Poetry*

According to Xenophon, Socrates among other things said that “Madness (μᾶνιαν) [...] was the opposite of wisdom (σοφία)” (*Memorabilia* 3.9.6). This is

⁴ Socrates explains to Ion that inspiration is a divine force (*Ion* 533d) that via the muse inspires the poet (i.e., Homer in Ion's case), who further inspires the rhapsodist, who finally inspires the audience. Socrates compares this divine force to a magnetic stone, magnetizing a chain of metal rings that are thus held together by the magnetism. The gods embody the first magnetic stone, and their force is subsequently transferred via the muses to the poet, the rhapsodist, and the audience, who in this manner embody the subsequent metal rings: “For, as I was saying just now, this is not an art in you, whereby you speak well on Homer, but a divine force, which moves you like that in the stone which Euripides named a magnet, but most people call ‘Hera-clea stone’. For this stone not only attracts iron rings, but also imparts to them a power whereby they in turn are able to do the very same thing as the stone, and attract other rings; so that sometimes there is formed quite a long chain of bits of iron and rings, suspended one from another; and they all depend for this power on that one stone. In the same manner also the Muse inspires men herself, and then by means of these inspired persons the inspiration spreads to others, and holds them in in a connected chain” (*ibid.* 533d-e). The crucial lesson is naturally that the force is not localized in the poets, but in the gods, whose power all of them depend on. The poet is moved and is the passive object of forces localized outside himself, taking him in possession and moving him.

crucial to the understanding of philosophy, for, as wisdom (σοφία) per definition is the object of the philosopher's (φιλόσοφος) desire (φιλία), philosophy must necessarily find itself in a critical conflict with madness. Philosophy must in other words be determined as the opposite of madness; and this negative self-definition is entirely in line with philosophy's negative self-definition in relation to poetry as well as love and desire.

In *The Republic* the poets are criticized for being utterly incapable of representing the world from its innermost being (the ideas), merely representing its phenomenal appearances. In the tenth book, Socrates refers to the common opinion about the poets. Among other things, it dictates that the great poet (598e), if he is to create a beautiful work of art, must create knowingly. However, the problem is that mimetic poetry is far from being knowledgeable, as it does not seize what truly is, but only the apparent. Socrates illustrates this objection effectively by pointing out how the best mimetic art would be “to take a mirror and carry it about elsewhere” (596d). The immediate things present at hand would be mirrored exactly as they appear (implying: *not* as they are), that is to say, the mirror would reproduce “the appearance of them, but not the reality and the truth” (596e). The mirror seems to represent everything with perfect accuracy. However, it only seizes the contingent plurality of the phenomena instead of the universal and principal ideas behind them. In contrast to mathematics, which abstracts from the particular, inconstant, and plural (τα πολλά) in order to formulate the general, unchangeable unity (τὸ ἕν) behind things, the mimetic poet merely imitates the phenomena (X.598b). Epistemologically speaking, the mimetic poet – reflecting only at the surface of things – fails miserably because he (unlike the mathematical discipline) is unable to abstract from the phenomena. He remains incapable of seeing behind them in order to break with them, as there is no negative or transcendent moment of his praxis. As in the example with the mirror, with which it is easy to create everything (πάντα ποιεῖ, X.596c), mimetic poetry is at best superfluous, as it represents things *unaltered*; their phenomenal plurality is not transcended. Thus, mimetic poetry fails wretchedly, being utterly incapable of establishing the unity behind the manifold phenomena, i.e., being incapable of abstracting from the phenomena and of identifying the idea.

In *The Republic* X (596e-97e), Socrates brings forward a tripartite and hierarchical model of the world, which consists of: (1) perfect being, truth, ideas, and the eternally and unchangeably universal; (2) contingent being, the changeable, and the particular; and (3) imitations, simulacra, empty or mendacious images (i.e., φαινόμενα, εἶδωλα, and φαντάσματα). It is in this sense that the poets are said to create the work “three removes from reality” (599a), as they merely produce images of the phenomenally manifold (τα πολλά) rather than the true and universal (τὸ ἔν). The mimesis of the poet is therefore “the third remove from truth” (602c). Socrates thus explains how mimetic art is “far removed from truth” (598b). The poet is thereby like the sophist – cf. Glaucon’s abovementioned description of the person who mirrors everything, as a wonderful sophist (θαυμαστόν σοφιστήν, 596c) – as both merely produce a shadow of a shadow, an image of an image. Having the τέχνη of the sophists in mind, the Stranger (from *The Sophist*) consequently defines *imitative art* as “a kind of production – of images (εἰδώλων), however, we say, not of real things in each case” (265b). What Plato reproaches the poets (and the sophists) for is therefore that they produce phantasms and what is non-existing (*The Republic* X.599a), whereby they give birth to the fraudulent, illusory, non-existing, and madness. In consequence, it is only children and mad or insane people (ἄφρονας ἀνθρώπους), who allow themselves to be fooled by mimetic art and, for example, mistake the painter’s painting for what is really or truly depicted (598b-c). Inasmuch as “every power is productive which causes things to come into being which did not exist before” (*The Sophist* 265b), and inasmuch as ποιήσις designates “anything whatever that passes from not being into being” (*Symposium* 205b), the mimetic poet (*The Republic* X.605a) must consequently be the very opposite of a creator, ποιητής, since he, unlike the latter, produces something non-existing from something existing.

In addition to the epistemological critique, Socrates unfolds a psychological and moral critique which claims that the mimetic poet provokes and flatters the irrational or mad (ἀνοήτω) part of the soul (*The Republic* X.605b-c). Taking this into account, Socrates claims that it would be right to deny the poet access to the well-ordered city-state, as the poet encourages the irrational emotions. The result being that he destroys (ἀπόλλυσι) the rational part of the

soul (τὸ λογιστικόν). The expulsion of the poets is therefore necessary, if one wants to avoid that thinking or intelligence (διανοία) is hit by destruction (λώβη). When λώβη signifies mental or physical damage, the word most often refers to permanent damage. In other words, poetry contains a great danger, which can only be avoided if one (the audience or the spectators) possess a medicine or antidote (φαρμακόν) consisting in the knowledge of what poetry really is (595b). In this manner, the tenth book of *The Republic* can be said to be such a φαρμακόν. The psychological and moral critique of poetry contains the greatest accusation against poetry, for poetry is so powerful that it is capable of seducing the reasonable and good – yes, even the best of us (605c). The problem not only consists in the above described distortion of reality that mimetic poetry gives rise to; the problem further consists in the allurements, which makes the reasonable and good man – who would normally be moderate and restrained (603e) in his grief (for example, in grieving the loss of a son) – blubber like a woman in the theater. Where the reasonable man does not display signs of grief outside the theater – since “nothing in mortal life is worthy of great concern” (604c) – the spectator, on the other hand, is immoderate in the theater, where he by identification, takes part in the sufferings and wailings of the hero on the stage. Through identification with the sufferings of the hero, we feel pleasure, since we – what otherwise would be deemed entirely inappropriate in all other public spaces – can give free rein to our sorrow and grief. We surrender to a self-abandonment, which is highly pleasurable, and which leaves us will-less. Where the reasonable man behaves with dignity like a man outside the theater, he is, in the theater, unashamed of behaving like a woman. He loosens his grip on the irrational part of the soul, and now says and does things that reason and common morals (604a) would normally deem indefensible. The behavior that we normally find shameful outside the theater now gives us pleasure (605e).

Glaucon must concur with Socrates: “it does not seem reasonable” (605e).

In like manner, the critique of comedy suggests that the spectator happily participates in enjoying buffooneries which he himself otherwise would normally be ashamed to display, fearing that it would ruin his reputation

(606c). Comedy teaches us to loosen our hold of our sensuality, and before we know it we become play-actors in our own lives (606c). The consequence being that tragedy, comedy, and poetry in general must be ostracized: “For if you grant admission to the honeyed muse in lyric or epic, pleasure and pain will be lords of your city instead of law and that which shall from time to time have approved itself to the general reason as the best” (607a). And as concerns sexual desire (ἄφροδισίων), anger (θυμοῦ), lust (ἐπιθυμητικῶν), the painful (λυπηρῶν), and the pleasures (ἡδέων), the problem with mimetic poetry is that it fuels and excites these impulses that should rather be mastered and kept down. Instead of being restrained and domesticated, they are being installed as the rulers of our souls (606d).

In sum, the poets address the basest in us, the irrational (ἄλόγιστον, 604d) and the demented (ἄνοήτω, 605b) – which helps explain why they are incapable of imitating the philosopher’s character (*Timaeus* 19d-e) – and the philosopher must consequently be cautious and on his guard (*The Republic* X.608a). The philosopher is anxious (δεδιότι) with good reason, for poetry threatens his psychological constitution (608b). The philosopher does therefore not allow himself to take poetry seriously, as it rather is to be conceived off as a kind of play (602b). The irresponsible and irrational poetic works are contrasted with the self-controlled reason of the philosopher. Unlike the philosopher, who solely directs himself to the purely rational part of the soul, which he strives to emancipate, the poet does the exact opposite, as he feeds the irrational part of the soul, whereby he gravely jeopardizes its rational control. The poet is therefore a kind of magician (γόητι, 598d and 602d), who intensely flirts with the dangerous as well as with the irrational aspect of the soul. As a phantom or delusion, mimetic art entails a disturbance or derangement (ταραχῆ) caused by a certain form of witchcraft (γοητείας, 602c-d).

As mentioned, the discussion of the nature of poetry is described as a kind of antidote or medicine (φαρμακόν); the argumentation of the dialogue is consequently a kind of enchantment (ἐπωδῆν) that we must chant (ἐπάδοντες) to “preserve us from slipping back into the childish loves of the multitude” (608a). Poetry embodies a great spell (μεγάλην τινὰ κήλησιν, 601b), and we, says Socrates (implying the philosophers), are from time to time bewitched

(κηλουμένοις) by it. And when Socrates asks Glaucon if he is not also bewitched (κηλῆ) by poetry, he replies: “Greatly” (607c-d).

Since mimetic poetry is directed towards pleasure (600c and 607c), it seems obvious that the bewitchment of poetry is of an erotic nature. The erotic aspect of the bewitchment of poetry is accentuated by the description of it as a beloved (φίλη) or concubine (ἑταίρα), courting (προσομιλεῖ, 603b) the irrational part of our soul. As it says in *Phaedrus*, a ἑταίρα is a person whom one can criticize “as an injurious thing” (240b), since she aims at bewitching with her erotic allurements (cf. the etymology of the German and Scandinavian word for prostitute, ‘luder’, from the French *leurre* and English *lure*). The juxtaposition of poetry and the hetaera is extended from 607b and onwards, where poetry now is directly personified as ‘her’, i.e., as being a seductive and alluring woman. And just as the relationship with an attractive ἑταίρα can be bad for us, the relationship with poetry is – which, like the hetaera, exerts an enormous bewitchment and attraction – unfortunate and should likewise be avoided: “even as men who have fallen in love, if they think that the love is not good for them, hard though it be, nevertheless refrain” (607e).

At the heart of mimetic poetry, we therefore – in addition to its production of mad and empty phantasms, flirting with the non-existent – find the excitation of desire and pleasure. As Plato closely ties desire and pleasure to madness, this means that mimetic poetry paves the way for madness. For man holds sensuous inclinations that – if not kept in check – threaten to drive him mad. Virtue and excellence (ἀρετή) are dissolved, and unbridledness follows him who does not succeed in moderating his sensuous proclivities. The desire for the phenomenal world (and the things belonging to it) threatens to drive man mad, which is why self-control is crucial in order not to lose oneself. Sexual desire entails an excess, and thus a kind of ὕβρις, as it seizes control of the desiring person, who loses equanimity, moderation (σωφροσύνη) and the mastery of oneself, since the irrational and sensuous part of the soul is now given free rein.

Since mimetic poetry in its essence necessarily excites and allies itself with *desire*, it is necessarily intimately tied to madness, seeing that desire itself is a kind of madness.

Mimetic poetry is, moreover, necessarily mad, as it excites and feeds *pleasure*, which itself is also closely tied to madness (like desire). In *Philebus* it is specified that madness is the result of excessive pleasure, for immoderate pleasures allow the soul to be seized by madness (cf. 63c and 45e); the more senseless and unbridled one is, the more one abandons oneself to be mastered by pleasures (47b). In like manner, lawless pleasures and desires designate the domain for madness in *The Republic* (IX. 573a); here it wryly says that pleasures purify the one subdued for self-control and moderation, and fills him with madness (573b).

The relation of sexual desire and pleasure to madness is concisely summarized in another passage from *The Republic*, where Socrates asks Glaucon:

‘Do you know of greater or keener pleasure than that associated with Aphrodite?’

‘I don’t’, he said, ‘nor yet of any more insane’.

(III.403a)

The madness pertaining to mimetic poetry is therefore most serious, since it simultaneously nurtures pleasure and desire. And inasmuch as madness is said to be an undisputed evil (cf. *Meno* 91c and *The Republic* II.382c), mimetic poetry’s intense courtship of madness becomes highly problematic. Mimetic poetry is nonetheless not mad in itself; only its effects. In a paradoxical manner, it is precisely the poetry which expresses soundness of mind and that instructs by insight or skill (*Phaedrus* 245a) which brings madness about; unlike the frenzied and enthusiastic poetry which does not.

This is a circumstance into which we will look more closely in the next chapter. But at this point, we can tentatively conclude that mimetic poetry comes to represent the actual inversion of philosophy, since the latter – unlike poetry – is reason (λόγος), wisdom (σοφία), and self-control (σωφροσύνη) rather than desire (ἔρως), pleasure (ἡδονή), and madness (μανία). Philosophy therefore seems to be a rational activity, whereas poetry seems to be an irrational passivity.

III. *The divine Madness of Poetry and Love*

The moderate and self-controlled (σωφροσύνη) life is depicted in the *Laws* as an existence which is “gentle in all respects, affording mild pleasures and mild pains, moderate appetites and desires void of frenzy” (V.734a). A love void of frenzy characterizes the just and moderate life lived far away from the wuthering heights of the emotions and the passions. Or in other words: “Then nothing of madness, nothing akin to license, must be allowed to come nigh the right love” (*The Republic* III.403a). The emotions and the passions must be kept on a tight rein, if one pursues a philosophical life spent with searching for true knowledge and contemplation of the ideal. The philosophical life’s realization of order, stability, and knowledge necessarily takes place against the background of a rejection of the madness which sensuality, desire, pleasure, and the corporeal constantly threaten to let loose.

These arguments and structures are initially reproduced loyally and accurately in the *Phaedrus*; first in Lysias’s speech, then in Socrates’s first speech.

Lysias’s speech takes its point of departure in the distinction between the one in love (ὁ ἐρῶν) and the one not in love (μὴ ὁ ἐρῶν). Lysias’s overall aim with his speech is to persuade the listener (*Phaedrus*) that he should surrender to the one not in love (that is to say, Lysias) rather than the one in love. The one not in love will be beneficial to the beloved, whereas the one in love will actually be harmful for him. The ones in love are sick and mad, and they lack any self-control or composure; they reason poorly and have lost mastery command of themselves (231d). The one in love has lost his good judgement, since he is entirely at the mercy of his emotions and desires (cf. 233a), which is why he is even dangerous and devastating company for the beloved. In contrast to this, we find the one not in love (Lysias), who is not subjected to the hegemony of love, how come he does not act under compulsion (like the one in love), but “of their free will” (231a), since he is “not being overcome by passion but in full control of myself” (233c).

Lysias’s starting point, namely the identification of love and desire with madness (τὸ ἄφρον, 235e), is repeated in Socrates’s first speech, in which ἔρως (238b-c) is defined as an overwhelming, irrational “desire which overcomes the rational opinion that strives toward the right, and which is led away to-

ward the enjoyment of beauty” (238b). In other words, Socrates’s first speech repeats Lysias’s dichotomies, i.e., “sense (νοῦν) and reason (σωφροσύνην)” opposite “love (ἔρωτος) and madness (μανίας)” (241a). In sum, the one in love is sick and ruled by a senseless and irrational principle (*ibid.*); and all in all he is off his head (241b).

Socrates’s first speech is nonetheless already undermined from the beginning by his actual dramatic situation in the dialogue. Both at the beginning (238d) and the end (241e) of the speech Socrates notices how he is possessed by the nymphs of the place. This means that his critique of the erotic madness is put forward in a state of madness! The speech, which lauds λόγος, σωφροσύνη, and νοῦς, and which emphasizes philosophy’s delimitation of ἔρος and μανία, would never amount to anything, if it was not for Socrates’s surrender to love and madness! Finally, the opposition of philosophy and love – that is to say, of λόγος, σωφροσύνη, and νοῦς on one side; and ἔρος and μανία on the other – proves to be extremely problematic and untenable. For as John Sallis observes: “Yet clearly there is something problematic here: Philosophy, by the very word, is a kind of love – at least, a kind of *philia*, if not of *eros*” (*Being and Logos* 127). This important point is of course crucial to the understanding of the dialogue *Phaedrus* as well as the general *double-blind*, which philosophy enacts in its ambivalent relationship with the madness of poetry.

And in fact Socrates now finds that both speeches (Lysias’s and his own first speech) have “sinned against Love” (242e); as a consequence, Socrates wishes to deliver a new speech, in which he will atone by means of a palinode (243b). The arguments and views we went over in the preceding chapter (‘II. The destructive Madness of Love and Poetry’), which, e.g., are typical of Plato’s *Republic* and the *Phaedo*, are now characterized as being neither healthy (μηδὲν ὕγιες [also slang for ‘worthless’], 242e) nor true (243a). In contrast to the perception of ἔρος as a lunacy to be avoided, Socrates now claims that it was not true that one should rather open a relationship with one not in love in his senses than someone in love, who is mad:

For if it was a simple fact that insanity is an evil, the saying would be true; but in reality the greatest of blessings come to us through madness, when it is sent as a gift of the gods. (244a-b)

The sharp distinction between the bad *μανία* and the good *σωφροσύνη*, between the dangerous and sick *ἔρος* on one side and the healthy *λόγος* and *νοῦς* on the other, is dissolved. The opposition between rational and irrational, active and passive, conscious and unconscious, presence and absence, the same and the other is upset, since the assumption of self-control, self-presence, and self-jurisdiction as the highest good is questioned: “We, on our part, must prove (*ἀποδεικτέον*) that such madness is given by the gods for our greatest happiness; and our proof (*ἀπόδειξις*) will not be believed by the merely clever (*δεινοῖς*), but will be accepted by the truly wise (*σοφοῖς*)” (245b-c). If rendered by the gods, madness brings the highest good and the highest happiness; this is something the ‘rationalistic’ sophists in their limited self-determination are incapable of understanding. Unlike the truly wise (*σοφοῖς*), who perfectly understands that true wisdom cannot (only) actively be deduced or calculated from oneself, as it must be rendered from a greater (divine) reality, transgressing one’s own limited, empirical, and historical horizon:

The ancients, then testify that in proportion as prophecy is superior to augury, both in name and in fact, in the same proportion madness, which comes from god, is superior to sanity (*σωφροσύνης*), which is of human origin. (244d)

Socrates, then, explains how the priestesses and the seers “have conferred many splendid benefits upon Greece both in private and public affairs” when possessed; but “few or none when they have been in their right minds (*σωφρονοῦσαι*)” (244b). The mad, inspired form of divination is thus more perfect and honorable (244d) than the divination performed by people in their right mind (*ἐμφρόνων*) by means of intellectual or rational thinking (*ἐκ διανοίας*, 244c). In like manner, the poetic and musical madness will awaken and through bacchantic ecstasy inspire (*ἐκβακχεύουσα*) the “gentle and pure soul” to compose songs and other kinds of poetry as well as to educate the coming generations by “adorning countless deeds of the ancients” (245a):

But he who without the divine madness comes to the doors of the Muses, confident that he will be a good poet by art (ἐκ τέχνης), meets with no success, and the poetry of the sane man (σωφρονοῦντος) vanishes into nothingness before that of the inspired madman. (*ibid.*)

And this applies to love as well: Unlike the two preceding speeches, Socrates accentuates that the stirred (τοῦ κεινημένου) lover or friend (φίλον) is to be preferred rather than the sensible and self-controlled (τὸν σώφρονα, 245b).

The deconstruction of love and madness takes its point of departure from an altered understanding of madness. The fact remains that love is “a kind of madness” (265a). But madness exists in two forms: One is due to human sickness (νοσημάτων ἀνθρωπίνων); the other occurs as “a divine release (ἐξαλλαγῆς) from the customary habits (τῶν εἰωθότων νομίμων” (*ibid.*). Νόσημα was the same word Socrates and Phaedrus used in their portrayal of madness as the ὕβρις of desire. In this way, Socrates advances a notion of human madness, which – as sickness – primarily is to be understood somatically; yet this implies a crucial difference, namely that it is the one not in love – who, as a ‘fuck buddy’, merely surrenders to the beloved in body, not in mind – who flirts with the dangerous, unman, and sick madness (unlike the one in love, who also surrenders himself in mind under the influence of the divine madness). Human madness is therefore a kind of mental, immanent implosion in the body, whereas divine madness refers to the soul’s transcendent transportation away from the body.

Socrates divides divine madness into four each with their own god: “prophecy was inspired by Apollo, the mystic madness by Dionysus, the poetic by the Muses, and the madness of love, inspired by Aphrodite and Eros” (265b). All four forms of divine madness are transcendent, transgressing the positivity of the phenomenal; all of them break with the idea of philosophy as an active, autonomous, self-authoritative, and self-affirmative praxis; all of them are furthermore tied to the poetic and negative as the force of rapture or transportation; and finally all of them are associated with the philosophical (Socrates’s) praxis. In the dialogue Socrates displays all four forms of madness, as Robert E. Carter has noted (“Plato and Inspiration” 118-119).

Now, let us in the following look a little closer at Socrates's exposition (ἀπόδειξις) of the four forms of divine madness.

The Apollonian madness. The first kind of madness pertains to divination. As a self-declared seer (242c), Socrates is intimately tied to this form of madness, which is rendered by Apollo. It is therefore not without importance that Socrates mentions the seer and priestess of Delphi (the oracle associated with Apollo) as an example of how the divine madness offers many good and beautiful things (244a-b), for it was exactly this oracle that prophesied that Socrates was the wisest among men (*Apology* 21a) – on account of his deep recognition of his own ignorance (21d). In other words, it was Apollo and the oracle of Delphi that set Socrates in motion towards his voyage against the truth (cf. 21a-24b), and Socrates's entire philosophical praxis is therefore due to the calling of the god (33c). It is the oracle's reply which makes it feasible for Socrates to distinguish between the apparent and the actual, the phenomenal and the true, as well as seeming and being (21d).

Inasmuch as philosophy is defined as living in accordance with the calling rendered by the god Apollo, and inasmuch as practicing philosophy is an exercise borne by the muses, it is not different from poetry to start with.

When Socrates designates himself as a kind of seer (*Phaedrus* 242c), he employs a terminology typical of the description of the poet. Pindar, for example, writes: "that I may fulfill as a prophet-priest" (Partheneia 1, frag. 94a). The singer and the poet are seers, who – like the priestess of Apollo – give voice to the divinity and the mythological, transcendent reality by momentarily losing their mind. In the *Laws* it therefore reads: "There is [...] an ancient saying [...] that whenever a poet is seated on the Muses' tripod, he is not in his senses (οὐκ ἔμφρων), but resembles a fountain, which gives free course to the upward rush of water" (IV.719c). The formulation of the tripod of the muse is probably a hint to Apollo's famous tripod in Delphi, where Pythia sat when the gods spoke through her mouth. The passage moreover shows how the juxtaposition of the insane seer and the poet is quite traditional – it is a παλαιὸς μῦθος. The poet is out of himself, and his passivity is likened to a fountain, which, as an inscrutable source, freely allows the water to stream up without anyone being able to say wherefrom.

In his *La nascita della filosofia* Giorgio Colli claims that madness is the actual source of wisdom in archaic Greek thinking. In contrast to Nietzsche's idea from *Die Geburt der Tragödie* that Apollo represents the healing semblance and the formative, Colli emphasizes Apollo's relation to madness and destruction. The emblem of Apollo is therefore not only the lyre, but also the bow, which points to a certain ambivalence inherent in culture and civilization, in poetry and the art of divination, and finally inherent in wisdom and knowledge. To the degree that Apollo embodies the source of Socratic wisdom, the latter is therefore formed by an 'Apollonian madness' (cf. *La nascita della filosofia* 13-21). It was not for nothing that the Greeks associated Apollo's name (Ἀπόλλων) with the verb ἀπόλλυμι, 'to destroy' (cf. Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* 1081). It is consequently not merely a matter of reason to be in collusion with the 'Destroyer'.

The Dionysian madness. The Dionysian madness is about purifications and holy rites. The benediction of this kind of madness is described by Socrates in the following terms:

Moreover, when diseases and the greatest troubles have been visited upon certain families through some ancient guilt, madness has entered in and by oracular power has found a way of release (ἀπαλλαγῆν) for those in need, taking refuge in prayers and the service of the gods, and so, by purifications and sacred rites, he who has this madness is made safe for the present and the after time, and for him who is rightly possessed of madness a release (λύσιν) from present ills is found. (*Phaedrus* 244d-e)

The greatest diseases and troubles seem to be related to the somatic and human, which is underlined by the fact that it is the same word (νόσος) which is used in the description of the amorous excesses (in Lysias's and Socrates's speech against the one in love) as well as the madness, which – in contrast to the divine madness – is due to human sickness (265b). The cure of such disease seems to be brought about by a holy madness of the mind. The description of the purification (καθαρωῶν) through the Dionysian madness finds an interesting parallel in Socrates's description of how he must undergo a purification (καθαρωός), as he has erred or sinned (243a) against the gods. In his first speech, Socrates spoke offensively and shamelessly, as he described man

from a purely bodily, sensuous, and materialistic perspective – as people brought up among low sailors would speak (243c) – the reason he needed purification. Dionysian madness can therefore be said to imply purification from the phenomenal, sensuous, and bodily in favor of the spiritual, in which the soul becomes itself for itself without the interference of anything exterior or alien. This tendency is accurately formulated in the famous passage from *Phaedo*, where Socrates defines purification as follows:

And does not the purification consist in this which has been mentioned long ago in our discourse, in separating, so far as possible, the soul from the body and teaching the soul the habit of collecting and bringing itself together from all parts of the body, and living, so far as it can, both now and hereafter, alone by itself, freed (ἐκλυομένην) from the body as from fetters? (67c-d)

The soul purifies itself in order to live (οἰκεῖν) by itself alone (μόνην), freeing itself from that (the bodily) of itself which is not itself. In order to become itself, to free itself, the soul must negate and destroy what is alien in itself. The description of the release (λύσιν) from diseases in *Phaedrus* has the same wording as the description in *Phaedo* of the soul's emancipation from (ἐκλυομένην) the body; and the description in *Phaedrus* of the deliverance (ἀπαλλαγὴν) from troubles and sufferings also has the same wording as the description of death in *Phaedo*, where it says that through death “the soul is separated from (ἀπαλλαγεῖσθαι) the body and exists alone by itself” (64c). To put it differently, the Dionysian madness can be understood as a Platonic and philosophical purification through which the soul by means of an unrestrained negativity and ‘madness’ pursues the purely divine and abstract, that is to say, “the colorless, formless, and intangible truly existing essence” (*Phaedrus* 247c).

Philosophy is such a madness, whose essence partakes in the Dionysian and negating, and which through the transportation and rapture of madness allows itself to be moved away from the factual and particular to the ideal and universal. Dionysian ecstasy allows man to be able to negate the part of himself which is not himself, in order truly to become what he truly is.

The musical madness. Above we shortly reviewed Socrates's outline of how the poets' musical madness is responsible for the greatest works, whereas

the poets who only use reason without the assistance of divine madness, are said to create works that will disappear along with the death of the poets who created them (245a). The honor or reputation (κλέος) that the poetical work should ensure the poet, and which furthermore is intended to ensure the immortality of the poet and his name, will be denied him who only creates by means of art or reason. A more striking expression for the immense failure of such a poet is hardly to be found in a society so keenly obsessed with honor and reputation (κλέος).

Both poetry and philosophy are indebted to the muses in the sense that they carry a message of a reality transcending both. In this sense both are musical and inspired. The muses – whose name Μοῦσαι is possibly an ablaut of the Proto-Indo-European root **men-* ‘to think’ – were perceived as the origin of knowledge, and they are thus the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory.⁵ They are therefore crucial to the understanding of poetry, which is a remembrance of the old myths and narratives (*mythoi*), and philosophy, the knowledge of which (according to Socrates) is a recollection (*anamnesis*) of the divine and the mythological.

Towards the ending of the dialogue the philosopher brings tidings “to Homer or any other who has composed poetry with or without musical accompaniment” (278c) that Socrates and Phaedrus have heard inspired words from the nymphs’ stream and the seat of the muses (278b). The nymphs’ message is that he who does not possess anything more worthy than what he has composed or written can “properly” be addressed as “poet or writer of speeches or of laws” (278d-e); but the poet, who “has composed his writings with knowledge of the truth, and is able to support them by discussion (ἔλεγχον)”, and who “has the power to show by his own speech that the written words are of little worth” (278c), he deserves to be labelled, not τὸ σοφόν, but ἡ φιλόσοφον (278d). What the nymphs with inspired music have conveyed to Socrates and Phaedrus is that poetry is philosophy, if in the right manner it is combined with answers and explanations. If poetry was able to supplement praxis and work with the dialectical method (276e) and defend itself against arguments of disproof (ἔλεγχος), it could rightfully be labelled

⁵ Cf. Pierre Chantraine: *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* 716.

philosophy. However, we must be careful not overlook the potential optative (ἄν... ἔχοι, 278d): it *could* be so, but *is* not (necessarily) so. Nonetheless, philosophy and poetry are alike until this moment, and philosophy would not see the day of light, if it was not for the musical madness of poetry. Even though philosophy is not identical with poetry and cannot be reduced to it, it is nevertheless indebted to it, as it is formed, determined, and initiated by it.

The erotic madness. Of these four forms of madness, Socrates proclaims the divine madness of love to be “the best” (265b). When the lover is in love he beholds a divine beauty in the beloved, and “he fashions him and adorns him like a statue, as though he were his god, to honor and worship him” (252d). The beloved reminds the lover of a divine beauty, which he recollects by beholding the sight of the beloved. In the erotic madness the lover yearns to recollect the divine reality not present at hand in the phenomenal world. The object for the lover’s yearning and desire is actually not the beloved himself, but rather the divine reality, which the beloved – like a symbol or sign – represents: “and if they draw the waters of inspiration from Zeus, like the bacchantes, they pour it out upon the beloved and make him, so far as possible, like their god” (253a). In this manner, the erotic madness appears to be affiliated with the poetic, since the lover equally ascribes imagined qualities to the beloved. The juxtaposition of love and desire with the poetic is quite common in Classical Greece – for instance here in a fragment of Euripides: “Love teaches a poet, even if he’s previously lacking in skill (ἄμουσος)” (*Stheneboia* frag. 663, Collard and Cropp). Love inspires the poet to make poems, and the poems further instill desire in those listening to them. The poetic potential of language is in an essential manner erotic, i.e., both as an erotic force, moving and initiating poetry, and as a bewitching power, emanating from a poetry that excites and casts a spell over the audience. The poet makes poems by means of the force of the muses and Aphrodite: “Although love has the power and control to drive us out of our minds, it nevertheless gives the poet one power of his own, that of expressing himself in verse” (Claude Calame: *The Poetics of Eros in Ancient Greece* 36-37).

Just like the poets (cf. *Ion* 533e-34a), the lovers resemble the bacchantes, who are filled up by a divine presence, enabling them able to expand and

transcend the profane and everyday present. Love therefore refers to the moment in which the lover recognizes another reality than the profane. Socrates thus portrays the desire of the lover as a yearning to behold a divine reality:

Now a man who employs such memories rightly is always being initiated into perfect mysteries and he alone becomes truly perfect; but since he separates himself (ἐξιστάμενος) from human interests and turns his attention toward the divine, he is rebuked by the vulgar, who consider him mad and do not know that he is inspired. (249c-d)

The initiated person, who as the only one becomes truly perfect, is he who desires what is forgotten, invisible and absent (the divine) in this world. In his passionate interest for that which – to the profane eye – does not exist, the lover appears mad. But the divine and complete alteration or emancipation from the common, conventional and usual (265a) is precisely what characterizes he who is ἐνθουσιάζων. For he who is seized by divine madness is ἐνθουσιάζων, that is to say, in a state in which the god is in you (cf. *Phaidros* 241e, 249e, 253a, and 263d), which means that one perception of reality must give way to another. Love is an enthusiastic madness, since the god is in (ἔνθεος γὰρ ἔστι) the lover, as it says in *Symposium* (180b).

As a consequence, love is mad. On one side, it is mad because it brings about an *upheaval*, in which the one in love negates himself, departs from himself, as it becomes intolerable for him to remain himself due to the realization of his own lack, want or incompleteness (ἐνδεής, *Symposium* 204a). On the other side, love is mad because it contains a *rapture*, in which the one in love is reformed and transformed with reference to the ideal that embodies a new, potential reality, absorbing the lover. The madness of love is therefore given by the simultaneous upheaval and rapture, which in the annihilation of the soul's self-determined autonomy demands a synchronous *destruction and creation* of the soul.

We have hereby completed the review of the four forms of god given madness in Socrates's second speech.

Please allow me shortly to recapitulate: All forms of god given madness (the Apollonian, the Dionysian, the musical, and the erotic) are in an es-

sential manner characteristic of philosophy (here represented by the figure of Socrates). All four forms of madness are in a crucial manner characteristic of poetry, whose relation to them is essentially no different than that of philosophy. Philosophy's relation to madness is furthermore to a large degree accurately shaped in accordance with poetry's quite traditionally and culturally well-established relation to madness (in these four guises). Without these forms of madness there would be no poetry, but – as Socrates has shown in his demonstration (ἀπόδειξις) – there would likewise be no philosophy without them. Unlike the last chapter ('II. The destructive Madness of Love and Poetry'), we must here conclude that philosophy comes to mirror poetry in their common origin in god given madness. Philosophy is furthermore – like poetry – not solely to be understood from reason (λόγος), knowledge (νοῦς), and self-controlled sensibleness (σωφροσύνη), since it would be fruitless and void without the inspiration (ἐνθουσιασμός) and this standing-outside (ἔξιστάμενος), into which desire (ἔρως), madness (μανία), and senselessness (ἔκφρων, ἄφρων, and παράνοια) throw it. Philosophy thus seems – like poetry – to be an irrational, heterogeneous, and passive praxis.

IV. Conclusion

Philosophy must by necessity be poetry; just as it by necessity cannot. Philosophy *is* and *is not* poetry. Plato's reflections on desire and madness clearly demonstrates that it cannot be otherwise.

Philosophy finds itself in a constant strife between reason and desire as well as between control and madness; this constitutes its irresolvable and troubled dispute with poetry. Philosophy is in need of what dissolves it, namely the poetically and transcendently insane, and what stands opposed to its own self-understanding as rational and self-determined. Philosophy's origin and instinctual structure is directed towards securing a rationality that – if it was to exist by itself or to stand alone – would never see the day of light: "The point, in short, is that the formation of universal concepts is not a purely logical procedure but requires us to be inspired and possessed by a vision that transcends both our perceptions and our logic" (Francisco J. Gonzalez: "The Hermeneutics of Madness" 103n22). Philosophy must first be poetry before it

can be philosophy. As the inspired madness escapes the conscious control of the enthusiast, not only poetry, but also philosophy, contains an important element that is uncontrollable inasmuch as any production or creation (ποίησις) is unique, passive, and unrepeatable. The poetic madness and the divine madness are – as an ecstatic upheaval and transported rapture – necessary for philosophy as an opening and erection of the space of thinking, in which the distance, difference, and leeway allows thinking to formulate something *as* something. If it was not for the poetic madness, one would – popularly speaking – never see the wood for trees. This is namely, claims Plato, the situation for the uninitiated mob, the many, who nearsightedly remain in the δόξα and the whirl of the manifold and the particular.

The literary dimension in Plato's universe is thus associated with the open, exploratory, and questioning aspect of his dialogues (and especially of their main character, Socrates). The questioning activity allows the gaze to be directed towards the possible; the questioning essentially raises the possibility of whether being and the world could perhaps be thought *differently*. The questioning activity is therefore transcending and mad (like poetry), as it transgresses the established ways of understanding ourselves and the world. *Could things be different... Could one imagine that?...* The projective and poetic element is clear. The one questioning and the one making poetry tend to be one: Both activities involve an uncanny upheaval of the conventional and everyday-like – an upheaval which can seem fateful in its questioning of the hidden and unformulated. It is therefore no coincidence that the monstrous Sphinx (which asks questions and subsequently kills people if they cannot answer) is named a harsh *singer* (Sophocles: *Oedipus the King* 36).

In other words, the divine madness, which philosophy has in common with poetry, enables that something can appear *as* something – like the glade in the forest that secures the wanderer the proper distance to behold the forest *as* forest for the first time. The path to the truth is therefore an experience, which – like divine madness – discloses our transcendence, i.e., what we seem to be, but are not, and what does not appear for us, but which actually is. Knowledge therefore presupposes an *aporia* – for as Gian Balsamo points out: “The *dialogic* hospitality of this philosophical *lógos* entails, first of all, a stance of

adaptation to the disturbance brought about by diversity, by alterity [...] a politics of self-identity constituted, as John Sallis would have it, in the self's being different from itself' (*Pruning the Genealogical Tree* 261). Ferit Güven identifies a similar logic at play within the question regarding madness in Plato: "Therefore, madness is already a philosophical term in Plato, both as 'definition' of philosophy where the maddest is also the most rational, and as that which is 'excluded' from philosophical activity, namely all things associated with the sensuous world" (*Madness and Death in Philosophy* 28-29). As concerns reason and madness, the principle of contradiction seems to have been suspended: Reason is both rational and irrational; madness is both mad and rational – and philosophy is both poetry and the precise opposite.

As Aristotle writes in *Eudemian Ethics* 1248a (in an echo of Plato's *Meno* 99b-d), the origin of reason is not reason, but something stronger. This is equal to saying that the origin of thinking is not given by reason, which means that reason is a derivation of a thinking that creates it afterwards. In his commentary to Nietzsche, Heidegger actually speaks about the 'the poetizing essence of reason'. In a passage in which he quotes *Phaedrus* 247c he writes:

However, the poetizing essence of reason refers all human, that is, all rational knowing to a higher origin, whereby 'higher' means essentially lying beyond our everyday habitual taking up and copying. What is apprehended in reason, namely, beings *as* beings, cannot be taken into possession by mere discovery. When Plato tells, for example, in his dialogue *Phaedrus* of the descent of the 'Idea' from a supracelestial place, *hyperouranios topos*, into the soul of man down below, thought metaphysically, is nothing other than the Greek interpretation of the poetizing essence of reason, that is, its *higher origin*. (*Nietzsche* 3 96-97)

If the ideas are located beyond the sky, they are not immediately present at hand for the human horizon of experience, meaning that they can only be given poetically – inasmuch as poetry or creation signifies that something appears where nothing existed before (cf. *Symposium* 205b). If the truly transported thinking – i.e., the philosophical thinking that exceeds the factual, positive, and commonsensical – does not originate in reason, then neither does true knowledge. On the one hand, reason (as idea and knowledge about the

universal) is rendered by a poetic transferal from a non-localizable place beyond our positive and empirical horizon of experience. On the other hand, reason (as scientific knowledge or principle) interprets and categorizes the god given message. The first form of reason must be said to be divine inasmuch as it has a 'higher origin', which qualifies it as poetic; whereas the other form of reason is human, as it categorizes, differentiates, systematizes, deduces, etc. In that sense one would have to say that reason is a latecomer, which is granted a place within thinking *post festum* as a kind of rationalization. Reason is in this manner rather a late demonstration of knowledge rendered in advance. This is the point in Descartes's critique of the 'dialecticians', whose art, the syllogism, does not enable them to know something true, if they did not know it beforehand. They can only deduce the truth with which they were familiar in advance. For this reason, Descartes claims that it "is obvious therefore that they themselves can learn nothing new from such forms of reasoning" (*Rules for the Direction of the Mind* X.5), meaning "that ordinary dialectic is of no use whatever to those who wish to investigate the truth of things" (*ibid.*). Thinking – that is to say, true thinking, philosophical thinking, which is erotic – is thus poetic before it is rational. This in no way means that the door is left open to irrationalism or anti-rationality, but rather that reason should not be hypostasized. Or to use a more modern example to illustrate it: Research or genuine insight must, to start with, be creative or intuitive in order to prepare the ground for the discovery of something new. As Karl Popper underlines, scientific research presupposes daring, i.e., *bold conjecture*, which afterwards must be subjected to strict verification. And while strict rules of verification can be erected and put forward, the same does not apply to bold conjecture leading to discoveries. To some extent, the reason consisting in strict verification is utterly impotent as regards the knowledge of what is not yet discovered: "Bold ideas, unjustified anticipations, and speculative thought, are our only means for interpreting nature: our only organon, our only instrument, for grasping her" (*The Logic of Scientific Discovery* 280). The creation of genuinely new knowledge cannot solely be deduced from well-established knowledge patterns; it cannot entirely be calculated from already given algorithms, as it contains a certain degree of unpredictability. It is therefore *unjustified* by reason. Something simi-

lar is expressed in a pedestrian, yet deeply profound comment that the Danish physicist and thinker Niels Bohr, according to physicist Otto R. Frisch, made to his son at a conference in 1952: “No, no [...] You’re just being logical, you’re not thinking” (*What Little I Remember* 95).

Now, please allow me to return to Plato in the following. One might object that my interpretation rests on the assumption of an opposition between τέχνη/μίμησις and μανία/ἐνθουσιασμός that may be less contradictory than first assumed. Yes, there are several passages that may seem to question this supposedly opposition. In the *Apology* (22b-c), for example, inspiration appear to be ambiguously spread out between a naturalistic or intuitive perception guided by φύσις and a religious or metaphysical view. In *Phaedrus* (245a) τέχνη plays a certain role (τέχνη is not sufficient, but must first and foremost be guided by the divine inspiration). *Laws* (IV.719c-d) allows a mimetic τέχνη to coexists alongside with the frenzy of ἐνθουσιασμός, and the poet of tragedy; Agathon, combines the erotic madness with τέχνη in his speech in *Symposium* (196d-97b). But opposed to these paragraphs stands *Ion* (542a-b), which exclusively operates with inspiration as being divine in contrast to any τέχνη – just as *Meno* contrasts inspiration with nature (98c-99e). And all in all, I nevertheless believe that, in the preceding chapters, I have clearly showed an unmistakably dominant tendency in Plato’s work toward contrasting τέχνη one one side with ἐνθουσιασμός one the other.

In the third book of *The Republic* we come across a passage, in which *mimesis* is not directly tied to divine inspiration (ἐνθουσιασμός), but rather with madness (μανία) pure and simple as an intrinsic trait of μίμησις itself.

“We will not then allow our charges, whom we expect to prove good men, being men, to play the parts of women and imitate a woman young or old wrangling with her husband, defying heaven, loudly boasting, fortunate in her own conceit, or involved in misfortune and possessed by grief and lamentation—still less a woman that is sick, in love, or in labor.”

“Most certainly not,” he replied.

“Nor may they imitate slaves, female and male, doing the offices of slaves.”

“No, not that either.”

“Nor yet, as it seems, bad men who are cowards and who do the opposite of the things we just now spoke of, reviling and lampooning one another, speaking foul words in their cups or when sober and in other ways sinning against themselves and others in word and deed after the fashion of such men. And I take it they must not form the habit of likening themselves to madmen either in words nor yet in deeds. For while knowledge they must have both of mad and bad men and women, they must do and imitate nothing of this kind.”

“Most true,” he said.

“What of this?” I said, “—are they to imitate smiths and other craftsmen or the rowers of triremes and those who call the time to them or other things connected therewith?”

“How could they,” he said, “since it will be forbidden them even to pay any attention to such things?”

“Well, then, neighing horses and lowing bulls, and the noise of rivers and the roar of the sea and the thunder and everything of that kind—will they imitate these?”

“Nay, they have been forbidden,” he said, “to be mad or liken themselves to madmen.”

(395d-396b)

Μίμησις stems from μιμεῖσθαι, ‘to imitate’, which further stems from μῖμος, ‘imitator or actor’. The problem with μίμησις as μῖμος is, for Plato, that the subject gets involved with the non-identical and non-existent. An actor is precisely an actor to the degree that he plays a role, that is to say, someone else than he who he really is; as an actor he essentially pretends to be another. In this way μίμησις is inscribed within the sphere of fiction. Which equals the sphere of madness. For as Rousseau writes in the Second Preface to *La nouvelle Héloïse*: “Trying to be what we are not, we come to believe ourselves different from what we are, and that is the way to go mad” (15). By associating with μίμησις, one risks to lose, *expropriate*, and dispose of oneself. It is therefore telling when Plato mentions the slave as a person, whom one is not allowed to imitate. For the slave is, per definition, someone who is not master of himself, who does not own himself – he cannot make any claims as concerns the ownership of himself. And as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe writes such an *expropriation* of the subject involves a danger of feminization and madness: “The two major risks in Platonic mimetism are feminization and madness”

(*Typography* 129n128). For Plato feminization and madness equals nonage, i.e., a state in which one cannot be guided by oneself. As a consequence, the danger of μίμησις is the same as that belonging to poetry. For poetry is both mad and feminized (personified as a woman or hetaerae, as we saw, in *The Republic* X.607b ff.). As in the examples in the long quotation above, woman does – just like the madman – not manage to control or master herself; all of Plato’s examples show women in situations, where they have lost control of themselves (i.e., in situations where women quarrel, profane, boasts loudly, are involved in misfortune, are besides themselves with grief, are sick, are in love or in labour).

The mimetic capacity to present something *different* as well as representing oneself as *another* contains a danger of going mad, as one risks losing one’s egological integrity. For as Socrates says a bit further on, there is no “twofold or manifold man among us” (*The Republic* III.397e). Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe explains as follows: “What is threatening in mimesis, understood in these terms, is exactly that kind of pluralization and fragmentation of the ‘subject’ provoked from the outset by its linguistic or ‘symbolic’ (de)constitution” (*op. cit.*).⁶

However, the critical problem still remains, namely that the subject would never be consistent with itself and achieve itself, if it was not already constituted by the mimetic representation, i.e., made possible by a movement latently mad. By taking the first philosophical step toward really and truly becoming oneself one exposes oneself for the risk of losing oneself, i.e., of going mad. The imagination that renders the representation (μίμησις) intended to direct the gaze away from the factual to the transcendent is not limited to what truly is, but is rather unlimited as concerns the unreal.

⁶ This objection is furthermore recurrent in Plato’s critique of the use of direct speech in poetry, in which the narration is created by imitation. Unlike indirect speech, where the poet would be unable to hide anywhere, and where the poetry and the narration would be told without imitating, the poet’s direct speech is characterized by a μίμησις, in which one speaks in the place of another like on was another, thus confusing the identity of the self and the proper (*The Republic* III.393c). One should avoid presenting oneself as a μῦθος, i.e., as an actor or stand-in for anyone but oneself. But Plato’s work begs the question of whether Socrates is not actually Plato’s stand-in or actor (μῦθος) *par excellence*? Is Plato’s entire work there not to understand as a μίμησις performed by a μῦθος? And is this the reason why Plato, in his seventh letter (341d), enigmatically claims that he has never stated his philosophical teaching in writing?

Moreover, another critical problem consists in the fact that the subject would never be linked to and made aware of the divine – just as it would never be able to imitate and alter itself, as it identifies with the divine – if it obstinately remained loyal to itself. If it remained *sui similis*, if it in a masculine stubbornness insisted on its own self-determinacy and on being unaffected by poetic madness (by μανία and μιμησις), recoiling from a feminine receptivity, its ignorance would remain unaltered and undisturbed. The subject would never *become* a philosopher, but would *remain* ignorant.

If one ignores or even banishes poetry, one *remains* what one actually *is not*, whereas, if one allows oneself to be seized by it, one gains the possibility to become what one *really is*. The philosophical λόγος, differentiating and nominating the identity of the named, guarding what is proper, can therefore not only be understood as a rational reason. Reason would namely not be reason, if it could not be exceeded or contradicted, that it to say, if thinking was not poetic or transcending. As a consequence, philosophy would cease to be philosophy the moment it did not wholeheartedly direct all of its efforts toward its ancient struggle with poetry. Yet, in a paradoxical manner it would cease to exist the moment it should succeed in conquering it. Even though such a definitive victory over poetry may appear quite attractive to philosophy, it would mean its own definitive and total defeat. Hence, the madness of poetry is both the closest ally of philosophy and its fiercest enemy.

Yet again the words of Aristotle come to mind: λόγου δ' ἀρχὴ οὐ λόγος, ἀλλὰ τι κρεῖττον (the starting-point of reason is not reason but something superior).

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