ARCHIWUM HISTORII FILOZOFII I MYŚLI SPOŁECZNEJ • ARCHIVE OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL THOUGHT
VOL. 69/2024 • ISSN 0066–6874
DOI: 10.37240/AHFiMS.2024.69.2

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Plato's Apophatic Legacy and the Unwritten Doctrines (I): Negative Theologies and Poetics

ABSTRACT: Plato's works and legacy are explored in this essay as the root of a type of thinking and a multi-millenary culture that I construct under the banner of the "apophatic." The apophatic is literally the "unsayable" that nevertheless functions as the orienting lodestar for everything whatsoever that can be and is said. This is my own way of construing the far-reaching import of Plato's thinking. The essay develops this construction of the Platonic gnoseological project with a focus particularly on the so-called unwritten doctrines, the ἄγραφα δόγματα, that are often supposed to represent Plato's most difficult and deepest thinking, principles which he shared only with a circle of initiates and would not commit to writing. The Tübingen school of Platonic interpretation has been especially industrious in reconstructing exactly what this teaching would have consisted in and entailed by collating all the mentions and fragments of it in subsequent texts and in the testimonies of Plato's students. My contention is that Plato's thinking hinges on principles that are necessarily unwritten and even unsayable. The nature of thinking, as Plato discovers and transmits it, is to be an aspiration toward a oneness that remains necessarily inarticulable.
KEYWORDS: negative theology • apophatic poetics • Plato's unwritten doctrines („agrapha dogmata") • truth as wholeness • learned ignorance

1. Apophatic Prolegomenon

In a performative mode suited to the topic of the seminar—namely, Plato's unwritten doctrines, the ἄγραφα δόγματα—I would like to give an unwritten lecture[1]. The very word lecture, of course, betrays a certain contradiction of this intention by intimating "reading," *leggere, lectura*, as the root of such a prolusion. Nevertheless, in the end, the idea or doctrine I have to offer is unwritten, even unwritable, as well as unspoken and unspeakable. What I am actually able to say (or write, for that matter) is *not* it—not the vision

[1] This text was written originally as a Guest Lecture for the 7th Platonic Summer Seminar: ἄγραφα δόγματα, Platonic Academy, International Plato Society, Lanckorona (Krakow), Poland, June 25-July 2, 2023. I thank Andrzej Serafin for inviting my participation in this colloquium and Professor Seweryn Blandzi for inviting my contribution to this volume.

that motivates and inspires my thinking and not what I hope to convey to you or hope that you will take away from listening to me. In this mode of speaking—or rather of thinking and ultimately "vision"—there is an instance or an action of negation in the very process of communication by language that makes what you receive from me essentially other than what I intend and aim to communicate to you.

Something other than you and me and our intentions and perceptions operates in the space between us and recodes the communication transpiring in that interval. The uncanny transformative power in the middle between us and in the linguistic means that connects us I treat as revelatory of an I-know-not-what that lends itself to theological, or more exactly to *negative* theological, interpretation. And for this type of approach to the task of thinking and quest for knowledge, I am inspired by Plato. Something of this predicament of thinking is captured by William Butler Yeats's verses:

> Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
> Upon a ghostly paradigm of things.
>
> ("Among School Children," VI).

The paradigm at play in Platonism is ghostly in the sense of being inaccessible to being seized by us as a positive entity or even an express formula or structure. The ground of all that we see and apprehend plays in and out of our experience but remains "ghostly," out of reach of our ordinary daytime thought and rational language. This profoundly Platonic point of view is fundamentally different from the usual two-worlds dualism commonly attributed to Plato. The duality of surface and ground in question here is actually a unity that expresses itself in terms of the (1) *apophantic*, or what appears (*phansis*) by lighting up (φανός), and (2) the *apophatic*, or what withdraws from expression, literally what moves "away from" (*apo*) "speech" (*phasis*). The latter is often figured as the dark side of saying, a structural obscurity.

The gap between what is expressed and what remains, by a kind of necessity, unexpressed is the fundamental structure of the apophatic. The *apo* itself determines a break moving "away from" the express mode of language, but also therewith of thought in its articulations. That Plato himself should have sharply distinguished between what is expressed in the exoteric form of his dialogues, written out in an enduring, objective, literary medium offered to the wider public, on the one hand, and his true and authentic doctrine spoken directly to and intended only for an inner circle of those specially prepared to receive and safeguard it, on the other, embodies a division that deserves to be understood as at least analogous to the distinction between the apophantic and the apophatic. Yet such an understanding entails that

the "esoteric" doctrine reserved for the inner circle be taken to be, in its very nature, something that cannot be fully expressed.

What is "apophatic" is not simply destined for another audience, one more qualified or carefully chosen than that of the general public. Apophatic thinking begins with the acknowledgment that the basis of our thinking always already escapes us, and irretrievably. Apophatic thinking does not encircle and capture its object, like a prey, but rather opens itself to relation with what it cannot objectively comprehend and is rather comprehended by. Such thinking cannot grasp and deliver what it is about but can only correspond to and reflect or refract this Other to which it reacts and relates. I contend that this is the nature of thinking as Plato bequeaths it to us and to a vast swathe of Western philosophical and intellectual tradition.

2. Plato's Unwritten Doctrines in the Tübingen School's Theory and in Apophatic Perspective

My argument in this essay aims to demonstrate that Plato's esoteric doctrine, such as it has been excavated and reconstructed by the Tübingen school, pivots on ideas that cannot be properly articulated at all rather than only on secrets that, for extrinsic reasons, are withheld from the larger public. It is of the very essence of Platonism, in my understanding, that its highest and deepest ground must escape complete rationalization and remain inaccessible to rational comprehension and human grasp. The nature of reason itself must be discovered as broken open to and turned toward something other than and transcendent of finite understanding and the human mind. In taking this approach, I recognize myself as a theological thinker—but this can be said equally of such illustrious scions as Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64), as well as of Plato himself.

For the historical work of proving what Plato actually taught—and to whom it was addressed—I defer to the exacting specialized scholarship that has been conducted and fostered by the Tübingen school. My contribution is rather speculative in nature, a matter of thinking with and through Platonism and its ideas. However the teaching of Plato may have been presented and have evolved historically, its content lends itself intrinsically to recognition of an inexpressible core that orients everything that *can* be and is articulated in philosophical propositions, even while remaining in itself out of reach for any such linguistic formulation.

This is tantamount to recognizing some kind of mystical (un)ground for Plato's thinking. We might take Plato for a thoroughgoing rationalist developing a seamless system for knowing and regulating everything what-

soever. This is in some respects the reigning paradigm of Plato's thinking in Western cultural history. Such an image of Plato is propagated by Karl Popper's treatment in *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945, volume 1: The Spell of Plato). Plato would prescribe rigid rules for a totalized, hierarchically ordered, anti-democratic and racist society immune to change. But it is also possible to find the ultimate ground or origin of Plato's thinking in a more esoteric form of mystic vision or even religion. Many researchers such as Andrea Nightingale and Catherine Pickstock have reconstructed the cultic context from which philosophy emerges in ancient Greece in order to play up the religious and ritualistic bases of Plato's entire enterprise of thought[2]. Even the research of the Tübingen school, given its emphasis on esoteric transmission of an otherwise secret doctrine, might be construed as supporting this kind of interpretation foregrounding the *Sitz-im-Leben* or life context for philosophizing. However, the cultic and often mystical orientation of these approaches presenting Plato's philosophy as religious in its ground and motivations moves against the usual intentions of the most important scholars who have elaborated the Tübingen paradigm and against the generally secular cast of modern philosophy.

It must be clearly admitted that my apophatic interpretation, while fully integrating the results of the research of the school of Tübingen, does not move within this school's purview, nor is it even consonant with certain main thrusts of that school's understanding of Plato and his works. The Tübingen school has dedicated its efforts to determining and documenting exactly what Plato taught in his inner-Academic lectures and unwritten teachings as transmitted through the oral tradition. The school's findings are based largely on the testimonies of Plato's contemporaries and students, including Plato's nephew and direct successor as head of the academy, Speusippus, and Plato's pupils, Xenocrates and especially Aristotle, who gives the most detailed accounts that have come down to us of this teaching in his *Metaphysics* A.6, A.9, M.6-9, N.3-4 and *Physics* Γ.

The Tübingen interpretation relies on oral tradition and later testimony rather than adhering to a strict hermeneutics of *sola scriptura* referenced to the literary corpus of Plato's dialogues. This means, in my view, that ideas and teachings are not fixed in one definitive form as inscribed

[2] Andrea Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Catherine Pickstock *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). Plato's cultic background has been deeply researched by Karl Albert, *Griechische Religion und Platonische Philosophie* (Hamburg: Meiner 1980). Heinrich Dörrie, Walter Burkert, and Otto Kern have illuminated the background especially in mystery religions.

in stone (or papyrus) but evolve fluidly in a living tradition. I believe that this form of transmission has essential implications for the contents of what has been transmitted and received as Plato's thought. I take it to be not one fixed and self-identical doctrine but a source of many sometimes diverging or even contradictory versions and interpretations. The significance of orality, ultimately, is that it is not a fixed formula like a text but a *capability* of answering questions diversely according to circumstances, as outlined in the conclusion of the *Phaedrus*. In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato critiques equally the weakness of the spoken word (*asthenes tou logou*) when it is imported into discussions as a statement heard (*akousma*) without its grounding reasons[3]. The efforts of the Tübingen school to determine exactly what Plato taught orally are important to me—contrary to the researchers' own intentions—for demonstrating a necessary indeterminacy at the source of this teaching. I believe that the task the Tübingen researchers undertake is infinite and open-ended like the dialogic form of Plato's thought.

My effort, then, is not to determine what the references to Plato's unwritten teaching, his *agrapha dogma* (ἄγραφα δόγματα), refer to, the concrete contents of his orally transmitted doctrine. I would go so far as to contend, in the Platonic spirit aiming at unity, that their reference is always ultimately to something indeterminate because anything determinate is exclusive of other determinations and thus introduces disunity. This hypothesis finds much confirmation at a thematic level with the notions put forth by the Tübingen researchers. Sources such as Aristotle and other ancients show how present notions such as the Indefinite or Unthinkable were in Plato's thinking as it was transmitted through the oral traditions. However, I venture this hypothesis more on formal grounds than on the basis of empirical evidence from the archeological archive. The very nature of ultimate principles, in an apophatic perspective, is to be inexpressible and to escape being grasped and formulated in definitive, exclusive terms.

Nevertheless, my work is not exclusive of *efforts* to determine exactly what doctrines the unwritten teachings may have comprised. Such efforts are necessary to evoke the ineffable in concrete, specific terms and from varying angles. These determinations I see as interpretations of an essentially poetic nature, ways of appropriating and applying the teachings of Plato in one's own thought and life and action. They are important and even indispensable modalities of realizing the infinite and in itself inexpressible truth that, I believe, orients all Platonic thinking.

[3] Cf. Michael Erler, "To hear the Right Thing and to miss the Point: Plato's Implicit Poetics," in *Plato as Author: The Rhetoric of Philosophy*, ed. A. N. Michelini (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 153-73.

I see the ultimate sources and the historical articulations of actual discourses as related in a manner analogous to the relation between negative and positive (or constructivist) theology—as the apophatic and the cataphatic movements that are coordinated by Proclus or Dionisius the Areopagite as essential to apophatic theology. An apophatic or negative theology cannot stand on its own and exist in itself independently of the cataphatic or affirmative theology that is necessary for it to have a content that it can limit or negate as the necessary means to opening its own vision toward what cannot be known or stated. Although the reality in question is absolute, our only way of approaching it is through our own inevitably relative and distorted manners of experiencing it as what always escapes from our fugitive cognitions based on unstable sensory and psychological conditions. In effect, positive theology or metaphysics constructs or imagines an idea of first principles or God and deduces from it the rest of creation or being (forms or ideal numbers, mathematical objects, physical beings). Negative theology inverts this procedure and reduces these phenomena as unself-grounding to their hypothetical, yet necessary, ultimate grounds. In apophatic perspective, these grounds as such are indeterminate: what we can know about them is how they have been manifest in the history of their interpretation.

Therefore, I want to turn this reflection in a direction facing *not* toward the archival past and bent on recovering what lies buried in the archeological ruins of Plato's Academy in fourth-century Athens. The field of my investigation is rather the cultural history of the West that has evolved under the decisive impress and pervasive influence of Plato. That Platonism has been thought through and worked out in so many different ways and places over the course of Western intellectual history reveals the possibilities of this kind of thinking in the actual record of its incarnations. Ultimately, it is the experience of thinking itself in Plato's wake that is the ground and warrant for my theses.

3. The Historicist Quarrel with Gadamerian Hermeneutics

It is fascinating to contemplate Plato's unwritten teachings—and perhaps even his inexpressible doctrine—in the history of its effects, its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, as would be said in the Gadamerian school of hermeneutics. Gadamer's hermeneutic project, I believe, should not be seen as irrelevant to the Tübingen school's discoveries and mode of analysis. Dmitri Nikulin, in his overview of the work and workings of the Tübingen school of Platonic research, points to the irony that "modern hermeneutics arises with Schleiermacher and flourishes in Gadamer, as primarily an attempt to make sense

of the Platonic dialogues, of their intention and proper sense. Yet, since the dialogues appear to be open to a variety of consistent but mutually conflicting interpretations, reading them leads to so much disagreement, misunderstanding, and even mutual mistrust in the guild of fellow Plato scholars"[4].

Friedrich Schleiermacher's influential Introduction (1804-28) to Plato's dialogues crystalizes commonplaces that the Tübingen school is constantly at pains to correct and counter. The Tübingen researchers dispute Schleiermacher's view of the written dialogues as forming a perfect and complete whole, a consummate work of art in themselves. This view, they lament, ignores or minimizes Plato's deprecation of writing. The Tübingen researchers' attempt to reinterpret the entire corpus from the unwritten doctrines aims to overturn the model of Plato primarily as a literary classic that has been influential and perhaps hegemonic since Schleiermacher in the Romantic period. However, they, too, by supplementing the dialogues with the unwritten teachings, complete Plato's system with the linguistic formulas of the *Prinzipienlehre* (doctrine of principles), namely, *hen* (One) and *aoristos duas* (Unlimited Dyad), and thereby sever thought from openness to its apophatic sources beyond speaking.

Gadamer, with his fusion of horizons, is suspected like Schleiermacher of undermining the fundamentally historicist project of Krämer and his collaborators to establish exactly what the historical Plato actually taught. The Tübingen school's consideration of later testimony and tradition is directed and regulated by the historical philological project of ascertaining the authentic teaching of the historical Plato as it was transmitted orally to his intimates in inner-academic lecturing and not as it has been crystalized in the published dialogues in written form. Plato would have held the latter to be grossly inferior and but a plaything or pastime unworthy of serious philosophizing. Such deprecatory statements about writing in the dialogues, of course, can hardly be exempt from the irony that otherwise so indelibly marks the dialogues. Might we suspect that the Tübingen researchers become severely serious in a way that the light and playful touch of Plato's imagined conversations would willingly deflect or even deflate?

4. Depth and Surface

One thing that changes fundamentally for me through taking seriously the inner-Academic, as well as the later testimonies concerning Plato's unwritten doctrine, as the Tübingen researchers do with such determination, is

[4] *The Other Plato: The Tübingen Interpretation of Plato's Inner-Academic Teachings,* ed. Dmitri Nikulin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 1-2.

that the schematic dualism of an ideal world of forms versus the changing world of material bodies no longer holds sway: it implodes. There are not two different worlds side by side but rather an apparent world and a deeper dimension of a hidden ground to that world. This is also what apophatic thinking affirms inasmuch as it thinks the apparent world through to its limits and finds another reality within it as its condition of possibility. Still, this other reality has no means of manifesting itself other than the world that is perceived phenomenally in what is actually experienced by finite agents through innumerable different and inevitably distorting lenses.

Already Socratic irony and simply the literary form of the dialogue build in a distance between articulations in the work and the author's own view. But the idea of the unwritten teaching adds a further depth dimension to this distance and a rich positive content to be endlessly explored, even though it is only indirectly verifiable. The hypothesis of an oral teaching opens a depth dimension to Plato's thought that is not exhaustively or adequately expressed in his writings. We have *testimonies* concerning it (gathered in Gaiser's *Testimonia Platonica*, 1963) but they only *witness* to something that is not—and, I contend, *cannot* be—present.

The somewhat mysterious oral teachings are in large part inferred and recomposed on the basis of their being shadowed in the express doctrines developed in the dialogues. There are the indirect testimonies of Plato's students concerning his famous Lecture on the Good (Περὶ τἀγαθοῦ), especially Aristotle's rendering of it in a memoire or "memory-aide" (ὑπομνήματα), which is no longer extant. It was transmitted in part by Alexander of Aphrodisias in his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (5.20f). But this material becomes most revealing by being read in the light of the dialogues, as Joachim Krämer began to do in his ground-breaking *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles* (1959), which stands at the origin of what we now recognize as the Tübingen paradigm of Plato interpretation[5].

This deeper dimension manifest in presence but not capable of being fixed in formulas is what, from my point of view, Plato's esoteric, or oral, teachings would have sought to convey. The Tübingen school has concentrated on discerning a parallel set of doctrines that Plato formulated in his lectures and not in his writings. I take their work as an occasion for probing more radically into a level of teaching that cannot be linguistically formu-

[5] Hans J. Kraemer, *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles, Zum Wesen und zur Geschichte der platonischen Ontologie* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1959). The nearest equivalent in English translation by J. R. Catan is *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics. A Work on the Theory of the Principles and Unwritten Doctrines of Plato with a Collection of the Fundamental Documents* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990).

lated and expressed at all. This orientation to an inexpressible teaching I find to be stated or hinted at in many places in the Platonic corpus (for instance, in the *Seventh Letter*), but it would logically have been evoked most intensely of all in the oral and esoteric teaching in which Plato reportedly approached closer than anywhere in his published writings to the ultimate principles and source of his thinking. I imagine that the presence of the master directly performing his thought in the select circle of those most capable and trained to understand him could have sparked some direct intuition of truth such as Plato describes elsewhere. Plato often imagines, in his published writings, an epiphanic direct experience of truth as the philosopher's initiation, for instance, as he finds his way out of the cavern into the sunlight.

Such a structure of thought turned to an unthinkable first principle that is experienced in an overwhelming and blinding light analogous to the experience of gazing directly at the sun is deeply embedded in Plato's conception of reality up and down the Divided Line in the *Republic*. Every other, inferior kind of cognizance is understood in terms of its distance from this ultimate experience of (un)knowing. An unsoundable depth and its manifestation on a perceptible surface is the very structure of reality in Plato's conception of it. This is a deep, underlying pattern of thinking that manifests itself for the most part unknowingly, or in any case automatically, in Plato's description of reality at every level, even at the lower level of physical reality. Such an arrangement of depth and surface is explored in the dialogues, for example, in the *Timaeus*.

In *Timaeus* 53b-c, in terms of purely physical and mathematical description, Plato distinguishes between the bodies formed by various types and combinations of triangles and the depth of their natures, which is very different from how they appear. Discussing the four types of elements (fire, air, water, earth), he maintains that they tend to apply automatically and unconsciously to whatever the thinker thinks.

> Every genre of body also has its depth. And it is wholly necessary that the depth comprehend the nature of the surface. But the straight surface of the depth is constituted by triangles.
>
> τὸ δὲ τοῦ σώματος εἶδος πᾶν καὶ βάθος ἔχει. τὸ δὲ βάθος αὖ πᾶσα ἀνάγκη τὴν ἐπίπεδον περιειληφέναι φύσιν: ἡ δὲ ὀρθὴ τῆς ἐπιπέδου βάσεως ἐκ τριγώνων συνέστηκεν. (53c)[6].

[6] Greek texts follow Plato, *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903).

In the second part of the discourse of the *Timaeus,* when he turns to the principle or principles of things, Plato first notes the inadequacy of his present mode of speaking of the subject matter:

> We shall not now expound the principle of all things—or their principles, or whatever term we use concerning them; and that solely for this reason, that it is difficult for us to explain our views while keeping to our present method of exposition[7].
>
> τὴν μὲν περὶ ἁπάντων εἴτε ἀρχὴν εἴτε ἀρχὰς εἴτε ὅπῃ δοκεῖ τούτων πέρι τὸ νῦν οὐ ῥητέον, δι᾽ ἄλλο μὲν οὐδέν, διὰ δὲ τὸ χαλεπὸν εἶναι κατὰ τὸν παρόντα τρόπον τῆς διεξόδου δηλῶσαι τὰ δοκοῦντα… (48c).

Plato's "present" mode could be understood to be probabilistic, as suits sensory matters, rather than the dialectical method necessary for achieving certainty—as in most traditional interpretations of the passage. However, Giovanni Reale sees the "method" in question as writing and opposes it to the oral method used by Plato to expound his first principles of the One and the Dyad[8].

Timaeus gives signals here that he is changing to an unusual type of discourse (ἀήθει λόγῳ), but since those to whom he speaks are familiar with the necessary methods, he says, they will be able to follow him (53c). This reference has been identified by scholars as alluding to the unwritten doctrines (53c)[9]. After pointing to the depth (τὸ βάθος) that is the principle of fire and the other corporeal elements, Timaeus refers to principles that are above these and that are known only to God and given to be known by those men who are God's friends (τὰς δ᾽ ἔτι τούτων ἀρχὰς ἄνωθεν θεὸς οἶ δεν καὶ ἀνδρῶν ὃς ἂν ἐκείνῳ φίλος ᾖ, 53c). Here the Tübingen school sees the first and supreme principles, the One and the Dyad of great-and-small, which they have identified as the unwritten doctrines treated by Plato in his lectures and reserved for only oral treatment, a reservation that this oblique reference explicitly respects.

5. Philology versus Speculative Thinking

However, the Tübingen scholars are not content to let these references remain shrouded in mystery as Plato seems to have done in offering them, at least in his published writings. Solving mysteries is a powerful drive of

[7] English translation modified from *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9 trans. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1925).

[8] Platone, *Timeo,* ed. Giovanni Reale (Milan: Rusconi, 1994), 285.

[9] Platone, *Timeo,* ed. Reale, 286 n102.

our Enlightenment culture but perhaps not so imperative for Plato's cultural sensibility. The openness toward an unfathomable divinity and the idea of revelation to those who are friends of God rather than a strictly rational accessibility may, nevertheless, be plausible for Plato. A passage in the *Philebus* (16c 5-10) especially clear in its allusion to the supposedly esoteric doctrine of the "Lecture on the Good" concerning the two first principles, the One and the Dyad, the Limit and the Unlimited, presents this doctrine as a gift of the gods to humans. It was revealed to the "ancients," who were nearer than "us" to divinity in Plato's day and age:

> θεῶν μὲν εἰς ἀνθρῶπους δόσις, ὥς γε καταφαίνεται ἐμοί, ποθὲν ἐκ θεῶν ἐρρίφη διά τινος Προμηθέος ἅμα φανοτάτῳ τινὶ πυρί· καὶ οἱ μὲν παλαιοί, κρείττονες ἡμῶν καὶ ἐγγυτέρω θεῶν οἰκοῦντες, ταύτην φήμην παρέδοσαν, ὥς ἐξ ἑνὸς μὲν καὶ πολλῶν ὄντων τῶν λεγομένων εἶναι, πέρας δὲ καὶ ἀπειρίαν ἐν αὑτοῖς σύμφυτον ἐχόντων.
>
> A gift of the gods to men, as it seems to me, from somewhere thrown down from the gods through some Prometheus together with the shiniest fire; and the ancients who were better than us and lived closer to the gods, have handed this gift down as a revelation of how all things that are said to be are from the One and many, having the limit and the unlimited bound up within them.

Like the Phaeacians, whom Homer says live nearer to the gods than we (*Odyssey* 7.201-5), these mythic ancestors would have received and transmitted divinely revealed knowledge. The principles doctrine itself, clearly alluded to here at the end of the passage, is not presented as a merely or purely rational grounding of all but as a divine gift. Rational grounding itself opens upon a dimension of divine revelation or prophecy (ἡ φήμη). This is the perspective that our secularized academic culture has been largely blind to in its study especially of philosophy. The Tübingen school, however, is more inclined to lament the Romantic mediation of Plato, particularly by Schleiermacher (1768-1834), which tended to exceed a strictly secular outlook.

Krämer and Szlezák point to the dominance in the reception of Plato of Schleiermacher's 1804 Introduction (*Einführung*) to Plato's dialogues, which Schleiermacher treats as a unified and living organism. For Schleiermacher, hermeneutics is famously an "infinite" process, but the Tübingen scholars reject this in their effort to define Plato's unwritten doctrine concretely. Krämer analyzes Schleiermacher's infinite interpretation of Plato as an erroneous Romantic aberration stemming from Fichte and Schlegel[10]. As infinite, truth

[10] H. J. Krämer, "Fichte, Schlegel, and the Infinite Interpretation of Plato," trans. C. Colvin, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 21 (1999): 69-111.

is, from the start, unattainable for a finite mind, whereas a certain philological conscience keeps the Tübingen researchers focused on what can be ascertained and proved by a scientific examination and comparison of texts.

This happens, of course, not without a measure also of rationally argued inference or conjecture. However, at this stage, opinions will differ—*die Geister gehen auseinander*! The Tübingen school has all along encountered hefty resistance and critique. Prominent scholars, including Gregory Vlastos[11] together with many others, believe that it is fruitful to interpret only Plato's dialogues and not to speculate on the unwritten teachings. According to Harold Cherniss, the entire theory of an unwritten doctrine is based on Aristotle's inadvertent or willful misunderstandings of Plato. The later testimonies would all be generated, in Cherniss's view, by certain early equivocations[12]. A more recent and somewhat skeptical evaluation regarding the Tübingen paradigm has been elaborated by Luc Brisson[13].

Even with my different focus, I willingly embrace the idea of the unwritten doctrines and the Tübingen school's theses about them. I take these findings in a different direction, but I share much in common with their fundamental intuitions and vision. I see the Tübingen school's method of proceeding as analogous to the Form Criticism (*Formkritik*) of higher biblical studies that attempts to discern the original liturgical formulas of hymns and prayers and the discourses used in proclamation (*kerygma*) of the Gospel. The Tübingen school's philology works also in the manner of Source Criticism (*Quellenkritik*) in tracing the transmission of various formulations of teachings to their earliest written sources. These methods of inquiry formalize their interpretive intuitions into scientific procedures whereas I aim to remain at the level of the initial imaginative intuition that makes them possible. This original intuition lends itself only very partially and incompletely to rational exposition. Something essential, the truth that is envisaged, always escapes linguistic and conceptual formulation, especially when this truth is the ultimate enabling principle of all, the Good beyond being or the ineffable One. Plato's texts are able to intimate and project such an elusive instance of some ultimate principle(s).

In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato explicitly mentions these highest principles. He says that they are in no manner sayable like other objects of knowl-

[11] Gregory Vlastos, "H. J. Kraemer: Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles," *Gnomon* 35 (1963): 641-655.

[12] Herold Cherniss, *The Riddle of the Early Academy* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1945).

[13] Luc Brisson, "Premises, Consequences, and Legacy of an Esotericist Interpretation of Plato," *Ancient Philosophy* 15 (1995): 117-134.

edge (ρητόν γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἐστιν ὡς ἄλλα μαθήματα, 341c 5). The first and highest principles are beyond all possibility of definition though genus and species because they are outside and first make possible all genres of being (*Theaetetus* 201eff 205cff). The Good or One is approachable only negatively by *dialectic through abstraction (ἀφαίρεσις) from all beings and to this extent as "nothing."* The *Seventh Letter* puts forward the vivid image of a spark leaping out of a fire and igniting the soul and providing nourishment from itself (οἷον ἀπὸ πυρὸς πηδήσαντος εξαφθὲν φῶς, ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ γενόμενον αὐτὸ ἑαυτὸ ἤδη τρέφει, 341d 2).

The Tübingen interpreters actually admit this ultimate transcendence of the first principles as beyond conceptual definition. Krämer, in *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles*, 543f, avows: "In its total transcendence and absoluteness, the Ground of being withdraws from the grasp of discursive thought . . . and is therefore in the strict sense indefinable, unpredicable, and linguistically ungraspable" ("In seiner schlechthinnigen Transzendenz und Absolutheit entzieht sich der Seinsgrund dem Zugriff des diskursiven Denkens . . . und ist daher im strengen Sinne undefinierbar, inprädikabel und sprachlich nicht fassbar"). Gaiser, even more decisively, in *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre,* states, concerning the principles, "Of course, it behooves us now to recognize that for Plato every type of conceptual communication is necessarily only 'imagery.' Therefore, also the oral teaching of Plato, insofar as it is aimed at the highest and most original, must be inadequate and always only preliminary" ("Freilich gilt es nun aber zu beachten, dass für Platon jede Art der begrifflichen Mitteilung notwendigerweise nur ‚abbildhaft' ist. Deshalb muss auch die mündliche Lehre Platons, gerade sofern sie auf das Höchste und Ursprünglichste gerichtet ist, unzulänglich und immer noch vorläufig sein")[14].

The Tübingen interpreters' project, therefore, must be understood as an effort to define precisely the concepts Plato used to indicate something that is per se indefinable. There is an inherent paradoxical contradictoriness to their positions that is frequently remarked and commented on with irony by critics. Christina Schefer begins her study *Platons unsagbare Erfahrung* by bringing out these contradictions or aporiae (chapter 1: "Die Aporien des Tübinger-Paradigmas"). Certainly, some qualifying and nuancing of its declaration of principles is called for in order for the Tübingen interpretation to be self-consistent.

[14] Konrad Gaiser, *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre. Studien zur systematischen und geschichtlichen Begründing der Wissenschaften in der Platonischen Schule* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1968 [1963]), 307f.

6. Wholeness of Truth and Apophasis

I read our classic texts, whether philosophical, literary, or theological, from the standpoint of what they do not and cannot say. This enables us to relate to a wholeness that they cannot as such grasp and articulate. Surely a vision of whole and unconditioned truth is at the heart of Plato's philosophizing, too, whether written or oral. Wholeness of comprehension and truth have been indispensable goals of philosophizing ever since its inception in ancient Greece. This aspiration is inscribed in the most programmatic, overarching propositions of pre-Socratic philosophy such as Thales's "all is water" or Anaximenes's "all is air"—etc. Significantly, these inaugural attempts to express reality as a whole resort to imagination and metaphor. This unphilosophical quest for comprehension of the whole is channeled through Plato as the indispensable engenderer or transmitter of philosophical tradition in the West.

The ideal of some kind of wholeness of vision and understanding animates Socrates's restless questioning—certainly as it is represented by Plato. Socrates turns each question over and over, exposing it on all its sides, seeking ever greater wholeness of vision and noting the aporiae that arise constantly as a result of this effort. Never satisfied to rest within a partial perspective, Plato's Socrates pushes every formulation always further into some kind of contradiction in order to take aim again at a newly expanded vision of the whole.

What does referring Plato's teaching to unwritten esoteric doctrines offer as advantages for interpreting him? Were Plato's lectures less open-ended and more apodictic in their method and results than his writings? I would take this in any case to be a difference of style rather than of substance. It seems to me that the spirit of Platonism is oriented, in intent and in effect, to an infinite truth that surpasses all finite, human formulations and puts us rather into relation with the holy—which is (w)hol(l)y beyond us and ungraspable.

There was in critical theory of the 1960s and 70s an abandonment of wholeness. The pretense to wholeness, not to mention holiness, was placed under accusation as a totalizing form of thinking which seemed to rhyme with totalitarian regimes. Karl Popper's attack on Plato as an enemy of the open society gave a certain shape and historical orientation to such accusations. Nevertheless, the spirit of the humanities demands that they strive after wholeness in thinking. This is fundamental to the aims and purpose of learning in humanities disciplines.

An exigency of wholeness is present, for instance, in the phenomenological quest as outlined by Edmund Husserl based on crucial historical

precedents in Descartes and Hegel. Even Heidegger thinks a kind of wholeness, although he inverts Hegel by seeking wholeness at the beginning of thought rather than as its end-result. Of course, this can only be a wholeness that is ever so partially apprehended by humans and only on the basis of their taking cognizance of their limits, even of the inherent defectiveness of our finite knowing, not to mention our existential woundedness.

Yet orienting ourselves negatively to the whole that we cannot as such grasp is a kind of exigency or first commandment of any type of thinking that is not going to become reductive. Admittedly, scientific thinking is reductive: it means to be and even has to be reductive in order to be pragmatically useful. But there is also speculative thinking and contemplation of ideas for their own sake in Platonic tradition that conceives a higher purpose than that of any practical knowing. Apophatic thinking delivers no useful knowledge or applicable truth, but it orients thought in such a way as to keep it open to the totality of its possibilities and so to truth in its wholeness.

I propose that thinking apophatically is, in its deeper core and character, thinking Platonically and that only apophatic thinking can relate to truth in its wholeness, which means also in its unity. I consider apophatic thinking to be the true and authentic way to think like Plato. And the warrant is not so much in the written dialogues as in another style of thinking projected from the secret doctrine of the unwritten teachings, notably in Plato's famous Lecture on the Good. Thinking the ideal is a matter of thinking without specifying or fixing in writing, or even in language (even speech in the end has to be understood as a kind of writing, an *archi-écriture* in Derrida's sense in *De la grammatologie*). This Platonic thinking can be called thinking in an aspirational mode. It attends, above all, to what one aspires to think. At this juncture, a certain Platonic idealism proffers its essential matrix and template.

My apophatic philosophy is based not on what is definitely known but on the "aspiration" to know; it exists in an optative mood. I take this to be a way of being Platonic, of aspiring to Ideas that are not as such empirically given and even treating them as more concrete and real than what *is* empirically given. Orienting all definite knowing to an unknowing at its ground and origin, which is the nature of apophatic thought as I construe it, can be understood as a kind—and perhaps an original and perennial kind—of Platonism. There is always a transcendent ground for any knowing, a ground transcending knowing, which norms it and makes it the knowing it is. In principle, if the truth is the whole and can be known only as whole, only this transcendent ground can be known truly—but only by being *un*known.

Plato's theory of ideas raises controversies, but what I take as the central inspiration of Platonic thought is the idea that our human thoughts

and discourses make sense and disclose truth to the extent that they are regulated by some kind of principle that exceeds them and norms them. The norm cannot be grasped and articulated whole. It can only be related to as we are able to imagine it. Its existence is witnessed by its ability to guide and regulate human thought and action. It operates in and through human freedom. It is not just an objective presence or identity, and in itself it counts as nothing. Wherever it is manifest, there is always some free human mediation in defining its nature and scope. Plato's *Republic* represents one such aspirational ideal. Dante's *Commedia* envisions another in the vocabulary of Christian theology instead of Greek philosophy.

There is always some mediation of imagination in our knowledge, even when we attempt to think literally. The "literal" sense is already itself a metaphor. The idea is that literal sense is founded on the "letter" as a figure for an object. This is a way of imagining sense as founded on things. Letters in Greek philosophy were taken as atomic elements, *stoicheia* (στοιχεία). Yet the mediation of language opens such things to the infinite possibilities for imagining them. Thus, the metaphor of the letter in the idea of "literal sense" bases thought not on a definite object but on an open chain of possible metaphorical substitutions. There is no literal sense that is not itself grounded in such a groundless, open field of possible resonances.

What I consider an essentially Platonic way of thinking by relating all thought to the unthinkable, to the ultimate causal principles which cannot themselves be grasped, is a universal condition that projects the universal extension of apophatic thought. Plato's image of the Divided Line is a good example of how all that is and is seen and known relates to something that is not seen and not known. The double division of the line doubles the invisibility of the intelligible to the sensible world by the invisibility of the higher realm of the eternal from within the intelligible world itself. In other words, intuitive knowledge (*noesis*, νόησις) remains invisible to discursive, conceptual knowing (*dianoia*, διάνοια).

7. Plato's Apophatic Method, its Modern Heritage, and the Unwritten Doctrines

Plato is oriented in an apophatic, or more precisely aporetic, direction already in the early dialogues in which Socrates reduces his interlocutors to perplexity concerning values, typically virtues, such as courage (*Laches)* or prudence (*Charmides*) or piety (*Euthyphro*) or friendship (*Lysis*). Socrates's aporetic method is a kind of apophasis in the sense that it brings out the inadequacy of conventional discourse to grasp and disclose the nature of the virtues and

values as they are humanly experienced. Each interlocuter is representative of a style of thinking about values that they are especially familiar with by trade or profession, and each is brought into a state of perplexity and reduced to silence. Realizing the inadequacy of thought and word to their object is the constant result of Socrates's examinations. Socrates's knows that he does not know the truth about these things as they relate to everything else, and this is the difference between him and those he interrogates. The difficulty is not just these other characters' contingent shortcomings but something deeper and structural. The exchanges expose a limit to discursive knowing per se. On this basis, Socrates becomes a symbol for apophatic unknowing or "learned ignorance," as Nicholas of Cusa, formulates it in *On Learned Ignorance* (*De docta ignorantia,* 1440), I, i, 4.

Plato's Academy built on Socrates's art of dialectic and (self)questioning is certainly one of the founding moments and most important source springs of Western intellectual tradition. The *Corpus Platonicus* remains for us a vast treasure trove, but alongside this necropolis we have also the shimmering evocations of a live transmission of an oral teaching handed down by tradition in semi-secret, esoteric manner requiring reconstructions by personal investment and lived experience of its heirs and interpreters. A vast archeological site for retrieving the life-experience of the Academy opens and invites research and speculation. The Tübingen school is not the only movement to occupy this ground, but it has played a leading role in advancing some of the most audacious and thought-provoking theses about Plato's oral, inner-academic teaching and about the institutional structure and life of the Academy.

These theses are suggestive not only for an archeological reconstruction of Plato's thought and its development, but also for a speculative reappropriation of Plato's thinking in later eras of culture. My work on Dante, Homer, and Virgil as prophetic poets, but also on the Bible and on modern poetic prophets, including Milton and Blake, interprets them as offering a kind of secularized prophetic revelation[15]. I trace this line of prophetic poetry in Romantics such as Giacomo Leopardi, Friedrich Hölderlin, and Victor Hugo through Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé to our own contemporaries[16]. While I do not propose to present these poets as Platonists, I think that there is something developed most originally in Platonic thought that makes them all possible as the poets they were. My effort, like theirs and

[15] See my *The Revelation of Imagination: From Homer and the Bible through Virgil and Augustine to Dante* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

[16] See my *Secular Scriptures: Modern Theological Poetics in the Wake of Dante* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press: 2016). On the pre-modern traditions,

Plato's, is to think reality whole before it breaks up into mutually exclusive parts and factions.

Indeed, many of these poets, within the standard intellectual histories, could also be cited as anti-Platonist, as arguing for a materialist, sensualist worldview, but my point is that they break through the very oppositional logic of discursive thought and open the mind and heart to a dimension of the unsayable. The concrete sensations that symbolist poetry discovers in a refined register of spiritual experience are also, at their limit, unsayable, as much as is purely intellectual form as conceived by Plato.

Symbolist poetry of "correspondences" projects sensory experience into an ineffable dimension of otherworldly or extra-worldly irreality or sur-reality. Even decadent, carnal sensations "have the expansion of infinite things" ("Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies," Baudelaire, "Correspondances"). Sensory things like ambre, musk, benzoin, and incense "sing the transports of the spirit and the senses" ("chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens"). This idealization of the earthly has a dimension of depth and obscurity, a "tenebrous and profound unity" realized synaesthetically by confounding objects or "echoes" of various senses ("perfumes, colors, and sounds"):

> Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
> Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
> Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
> Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent[17].
>
> Like long echoes that from afar mingle confusedly
> In a tenebrous and profound unity,
> Vast like the night and like the light of day,
> Scents and colors and sounds answer one another.

The unity in question here is simple and clear as pure sensation, but it is paradoxically "vast like the night and like the day." It is the negatively approached Platonic One that appears only as a luminously tenebrous cloud of unknowing—as in the mystical theology of Dionysius the Areopagite, the sixth-century Neoplatonic Christian mystic who produced the *Corpus Dionysiacum*.

I place my work interpreting apophatic thinking under the aegis of Plato's unwritten doctrines because they figure an aspiration to an ideal, or rather unspeakably real, dimension of reality that orients all that we can think in the truest sense of the word. The relation to what is beyond the

[17] Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Hachette, 1992).

knowable and stateable is nevertheless driven by a dynamic of knowing or love. A quest for a *gnosis* that escapes ordinary calculative or analytic reason is modeled by Plato's thinking as we read it in his dialogues and as we reconstruct it from the traces of his oral teaching. This posture of thinking poised before an abyss of what it does not grasp is one outcome of the path of thinking that Plato so ingeniously framed and bequeathed to an open-ended posterity.

In reading our traditions of philosophical and theological reflection along with poetic creation in an apophatic key, I recognize that I am extending Plato's own literary elaborations of an extra-literary and ultra-literary form of vision and inspiration. The cult of the unwritten doctrines is significant for me as carving out a space in the literary transmission of Plato's thought for what does not remain within literature: the unwritten stands out as an exergue, an alien space within the literary corpus and even directs the entire construct of words beyond itself toward the other that it does not and cannot comprehend.

This type of apophatic visionary inspiration has worked as a ferment throughout Western intellectual tradition, ancient to modern, and across the various disciplines of the humanities. It has contributed to producing the most sublime works of the Western intellect. Platonic thinking represents an intellectual acrobatics that dovetails into a leap of faith in exploration of the unknown. As oriented by an unknown and unknowable absolute, such an idealizing and absolutizing mode of thinking has produced countless speculative, artistic, and poetic progeny.

Arthur Rimbaud's "Batteau Ivre" ("Drunken Boat") careening in its madness through the interstellar spaces toward discovery of the Unknown ("L'Inconnu") picks up on and pursues Baudelaire's banner poem "Le Voyage," ending with a lurch forward or future-ward toward the Unknown as its lodestar. Its very last verse points this direction into an abyss of unknowing: "To the bottom of the Unknown in order to find the new" ("Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!"). Rimbaud's poetics, pivoting on the Unknown (*l'Inconnu*) and incarnated in his "Drunken Boat," are formulated expressly in his 1871 *Lettres du voyant*. He outlines his project as one of "arriving at the unknown by means of deregulating all his senses" (*Il s'agit d'arriver à l'inconnu par le dérèglement de tous les sens*)[18].

In keeping with the theme of the voyage, Plato's *Phaedo* presents Socrates's search for the ultimate ground as a journey and his death as a second journey, which calls to be interpreted through the mystery religions.

[18] Arthur Rimbaud, *Poésies* (Paris: Bookking International, 1993).

The journey of life ending in death and possibly enlightenment figures aptly as a sea voyage ending in shipwreck as a liberation.

Christina Schefer describes the Athenian rite of a ship voyage to Delphi to honor Apollo in the person of Theseus, who conquered death in the Minotaur and escaped the labyrinth[19]. She draws the parallel with Socrates's journey to immortality in the name of Apollo, ending with a sacrifice to Asclepius, Apollo's son. The labyrinthine structure of the dialogue, as well as its content confronting death and triumphing by arguments in demonstration of the soul's immortality, shows up as a ritual enactment of the mystery of escape of the immortal soul from the prison of the body through death. The dance of Theseus and his fourteen young companions in the labyrinth offer a model for Plato's dialogue as likewise performing a rite of passage beyond life through death.

Many Romantic poems end on a similar note of liberation through death, as in the famous last verse of Leopardi's *L'infinito*: "and shipwreck to me is sweet in that sea" (è il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare"). In Shelley's poem "Adonais: Elegy on the Death of John Keats," shipwreck and death become figures for a kind of fulfillment of the Platonic quest for an ultimate Unknowable. Prophetically anticipating his own actual death off the Ligurian coast in a sailboat caught in and capsized by a storm, Shelley imagines his eclipse as connecting him with eternity through his dead friend shining in the firmament.

> The breath whose might I have invoked in song
> Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven,
> Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng
> Whose sails were never to the tempest given;
> The massy earth and spherèd skies are riven!
> I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;
> Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,
> The soul of Adonais, like a star,
>
> Beacons from the abode where the Eternals are. (LV)

A slightly earlier stanza spells out, in even more clearly Platonic terms, the vision of a transcendent ideal manifest in the manifold of the sensory world:

> The One remains, the many change and pass;
> Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
> Life, like a dome of many-colour'd glass,

[19] Christina Schefer, *Platons unsagbare Erfahrung: Ein anderer Zugang zu Platon* (Basel: Schwabe, 2001), 140-54.

Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments.—Die,
If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!
Follow where all is fled!—Rome's azure sky,
Flowers, ruins, statues, music, words, are weak
The glory they transfuse with fitting truth to speak. (LII)

Of course, the differences between all these works are legion, but I think that the power of attraction, erotic in character, exerted by the Unknown across such diverse fields and periods of culture is a powerful witness to the importance of this structure analyzed profoundly by Plato millennia ago. How many august intellects of the most diverse kinds have been inspired throughout the ages essentially by Plato and the intellectual vision of a higher, supra-terrestrial realm of eternal truth that by its nature exceeds articulate language and draws the mind, instead, into visionary stupor and contemplation.

One outstanding example would be Karl Kerényi, whose Platonism is aptly described as "the experience of being irresistibly drawn toward the world of the Intelligible by the force of Eros, who leads through beauty (which is the immediate object of his desire) to the Good qua source of everything"[20]. Paradoxically, this quintessentially Platonic journey leads back through the logos beyond words, as described autobiographically by Socrates's account of his "second sailing" in the *Phaedo*. By turning back to logos and away from his youthful infatuation with the study of nature, Socrates is able to contemplate the limit at which the verbal discloses a realm beyond speaking[21]. It is especially language and its negation that opens to the dimension of the apophatic as the beyond of language.

Dante's *Paradiso* traces the paradigmatic theological journey to the ineffable that, I believe, remains the matrix for the Western tradition of poetry in its highest gnoseological aspirations, with Hölderlin and Goethe, or with William Blake and Walt Whitman. Especially epic poems embody this Platonic quest for a unity transcending, yet norming and holding together, the realms of being and knowing. They aspire to wholeness yet recognize a limit at which they must give over their quest to what is beyond verbal comprehension. These are blossoms among the fine flowers of Platonic thinking that make manifest its perennial fruitfulness[22]. ≈

[20] Thomas Alexander Szlezák, "On Karl Kerényi's Humanistic and Existentialistic Platonism," *Kronos: Philosophical Journal* VIII (2019): 5-8. Citation 6.

[21] Cf. John Sallis, "Socrates' Second Sailing: The Turn to *Logos*," *Kronos: Philosophical Journal* VIII (2019): 49-56.

[22] This epic tradition takes a comic turn in authors including Boccaccio, Chaucer, Rabelais, Cervantes, and Joyce. I trace this tradition of laughter as a parodic means of revelation

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