

Essay Review of Eva Brann, *The Music of the Republic: Essays on Socrates' Conversations and Plato's Writings* (Paul Dry Books, 2004), 378 pages

Mitchell Miller
July, 2005

In the twelfth of the fourteen essays in this rich collection, Eva Brann reflects on her experience collaborating with two colleagues on a translation of the *Sophist* and marks some of the virtues and goals that oriented them. "... ego [was] out," she writes and they sought to be "relatively fearless in the face of ignorance and fresh in [their] deliberate amateurism." (305) "We come from a school" — St. John's College — "that has the greatest misgivings about standing between a reader and the book." (310) Guided by their shared "sense of the pedagogical generosity of the dialogues," they aimed to let "the many-layered accessibility of the text" "draw the reader in." (318) This spirit of unassuming but daring receptivity, complemented by the teacherly recognition that the best gift is to allow others to receive for themselves, animates all of the essays in *The Music of the Republic*. Brann writes on a range of dialogues, including the *Apology*, *Phaedo*, *Charmides*, *Republic*, *Sophist*, and *Timaeus*; the pieces range in character from informal reflections on teaching and on translating to lectures on particular Platonic themes to full-length introductions to or exegeses of whole dialogues. Throughout, she sustains a selfless thoughtfulness that allows the texts she so evidently loves to open up as if by themselves. Attending to Brann's Plato's Socrates, one feels oneself in the linked hands of three superb teachers.

How may a reviewer avoid "standing between" a prospective reader and this book? The heterogeneity of its voices and issues and the probing, open-spirited character of its reflections doom any effort to reduce its contents to a summary. Let me instead just indicate its range by noting several of the particular riches that await the prospective reader, then turn in a more sustained way to the title essay.

Brann draws from a host of dialogues in order to set in vivid relief the manifold offense that Socrates, as Plato writes his *Apology*, goes out of his way to give his jurors, making unmistakable to them — and memorable to later generations — the danger he poses to the laws and customs of Athens. Two of her pieces on the *Phaedo* lay out the legacy of questions — twenty-one distinct sets of them, by her count, underlain by a web of some ten *aporiai* (see 40-41) — that Socrates leaves behind and expose the three Minotaurs that threaten it: the fear of death, despair at the limitedness of argument, and, perhaps the deepest of all, the "engrossing love of Socrates the man" (33) that he both inspires and seeks to slay. Has anyone so deftly conjured into palpability Plato's subtle use of the shadow of menace that Critias' later tyranny casts retrospectively over the dramatic maneuvers and the subtleties of argument in the *Charmides*? Treating the central digression in the *Sophist* with artfully informal precision, she traces the Eleatic Stranger's Aeschylean-Sophoclean transformation of Not-being from its "outcast" status in Parmenides (294) to its repatriation in Plato as the *arche* that, by providing to Being its unlimited internal differentiation, first opens it up as the object field for dialectic.

"The Music of the *Republic*" is the central and by far the longest piece in the anthology. It has been published in earlier versions at least twice before,¹ but the relatively unknown sites of these appearances have afforded it very limited circulation. Its publication in expanded and revised form here is therefore very welcome. Brann offers a searching, brilliantly constructive reading of the *Republic*. She attends closely to the modes and the performative power of Socrates' discourse, to the spiritual coming-to-be that rising to the challenges of this discourse can occasion, and to the disclosure of the ultimate *archai*, "beyond Being" (206), that she takes to lie in store for this emergent soul. As markers of the trajectory and reach of her account, here are four pivotal moments:

(i) *Ring structure*. The whole of Socrates' narrative, Brann argues, is structured as a ring composition. The outermost ring (making, therefore, the beginning and the end of the dialogue) is a *mythos*, first of descent into Hades (Book I), then of re-ascent from it (Book X); the next ring consists in the *logos*, first, of the just city and soul (Books II-IV), then of their degeneration into the factionalized forms of timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny (Books VIII-IX); the centermost ring is the *ergon* of the actual founding of a 'city' — that is, of an order of rule bound by friendship — by Socrates and Glaucon (Books V-VII); at the core of this centermost ring, finally, Socrates provides Glaucon with the "philosophical music" of his imagistic account — a potentially evocative synopsis meant to serve as a test and prelude to the noetic work that no writing, not even Socratic dialogue (206), can contain (156) — of the ultimate truths dialectic will reveal. Remarkably, Brann nowhere pauses to explain why Plato chooses to have Socrates construct his narrative according to this striking concentric plan. But the sequence and proportions of her own writing seem to *show* what she leaves unsaid. Is it right that each resonance in the second half of the dialogue returns our thought to its corresponding partner in the first half? And, too, aren't we turned back to the beginning in a way that, since the later turns (from deed to *logos*, *logos* to myth) reverse and so remind us of our initial motions (myth to *logos*, *logos* to deed), moves us to think the whole? Most important, doesn't this complex motion of return and gathering bring us back to the heights of the middle, back to "the light" — in Brann's evocative phrase — "of the ontological center" (244)? If these conjectures are well-attuned, then it ceases to be surprising that she writes very little about the unjust cities or the decision in favor of the just man's happiness or the just city's conditional rejection of the mimetic arts. (Brann addresses the last of these topics in a separate essay, chapter 9.) She follows not the external sequence of topics in the dialogue but its psychagogic impetus as "music" propaedeutic to dialectic.

(ii) *The "emergence" of the "knowing soul."* This psychagogy involves, if not a transformation, then a sort of doubling of the soul. If in the *mythos* of Book I Socrates portrays his project as the Heracleian leading of the Cerberus-like soul up into the light so that it may be examined (121 ff.), in the *logos* of Books II-IV he accomplishes this

¹ It first appeared, to my knowledge, in *ΑΓΩΝ*, *Journal of Classical Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (April 1967), 1-117. It was then reprinted in *Four Essays on Plato's Republic*, a special issue of *The St. John's Review*, Vol. XXXIX, no.s 1 and 2 (1989-90), 1-103.

examination, discerning in its Cerberan multiplicity a tripartite whole of potentially conflicting kinds of desire. But this work of *logos*, as a deed, is itself the occasion for the soul to present itself under a new fundamental aspect: in coming to *know* itself (133 ff.), the soul discloses itself now not as a complex of desires but as "the organ by which each man knows" (513c5) (164). How radical is this emergence of what Brann calls the "learning" (164) or "knowing soul" (186)? Does this "non-dimensional" soul so transcend the desires of spiritedness and appetite that it may exist independently of the very embodiment these entail? That is, does, or can, this "knowing soul" exist separately from the "embodied soul" (165)?² Though she lets this question surface when she pauses to explore Aristotle's strange report of Plato's numerological account of the soul at *De Anima* 404b16 ff., she seems to leave it unresolved and open, choosing instead to be led by the underlying "music" it belongs to. As a process of existential genesis, the emergence of the "knowing soul" is occasioned by the elicitation and setting-to-work of the soul's cognitive powers; these powers are elicited, in turn, by the disclosure of the object fields proper to them. The explicit height of Socrates' "music" — his "art of conversion" of the soul to the "love of wisdom" (157-8) — is his ascending account of these object fields by way of the figures of the sun, the line, and the cave.

(iii) *The metaphysical strains of Socrates' "music" — the "divided line" and the "journey toward the 'greatest study'.*" When Glaucon shows himself not yet ready for dialectic (see 533a), Socrates responds as a well-attuned teacher: he abstains from direct conceptual explication (170), providing instead images that, should Glaucon take them up and think them through, might eventually lead him to the sort of reflective understanding his "knowing soul" requires (194 ff.). This understanding therefore both is and is not 'in' the text: in leaving "the *logos* behind [his] images" unspoken, Socrates leaves it "latent" (177) in them and, in this latency, there to be discovered. Brann's argument for this turns on her interpretation of the play of original and likeness in the figure of the divided line. The complex analogy that structures the line implies that each lower segment marks an object field that stands in the relation of likeness-to-original to the object field marked by the next higher section. Conversely, the objects proper to each higher section are causally responsible, as originals for their likenesses, for the constitution of the objects proper to the next lower section. Thus, to quote Brann's own striking image, the Good "mak[es] our world [as] a cascading progression of likenesses" (193); to reconstruct this "cascade": the Good first gives rise to forms as its likenesses, and forms to the perfect structures studied in mathematics, and these latter to the sensibles that imperfectly image them, and sensibles to shadows, reflections, and the like.³ By laying out these regions on the divided line, Socrates provides Glaucon a mathematical image for his future

² This is also, of course, the thematic question of the *Phaedo*. "What," Brann asks in "Socrates' Legacy: Plato's *Phaedo*" (chapter 2), "is the nature of that in us which makes us thoughtful? Is it an emergent condition of the body or a separable and indestructible soul?" (40) In this connection, note her distinction between the two chief meanings of "soul" in "Introduction to the *Phaedo*" (chapter 1, p. 8).

³ Brann states this explicitly in the next essay, "Imitative Poetry: Book X of the *Republic*" (chapter 9): "The grades of Being cascade from the top as a series of originals and images; each higher realm casts its images into the next lower realm" (266).

philosophical education, the "longer, imageless journey toward the 'greatest study'" (236), that is, toward the purely noetic comprehension of the *archai* of the whole.

(iv) *The sun and the cave* — "dianoetic eikasia" and the One and the Dyad. Brann is both bold and responsive in risking discussion of these *archai*: she is bold to treat of them at all, given Socrates' indirectness and reticence, but she is moved — even, perhaps, constrained — to take the risk by her deep appreciation of what she credits Jacob Klein as first articulating as "dianoetic eikasia."⁴ *Eikasia*, the lowest cognitive power on the divided line, is the soul's perceptual capacity, given a shadow or reflection, to "recognize" it *as* an image and, so, to turn back to the thing that is its original; specifically *dianoetic eikasia* is the soul's power to recognize likenesses as likenesses by means of *dianoia*, "thinking," and it operates at every level of the divided line. It is, on the one hand, a distinctly interpretive capacity (for thinking moves back from the given by making "suppositions" [179] as to what is prior to the given and, in its own manner of presence, different in kind from it), and, on the other hand, it has a structural basis in and correspondence with the very nature of things (for the Good itself, in initiating the "cascade" of original/likeness relations, thereby "everywhere provide[s] places for the cognitive soul to learn in" [210]). In the present context it must suffice to indicate three main insights that Brann, on the strength of her practice of dianoetic *eikasia*, puts before us. First, in Socrates' figure of the sun she finds the image not only of the Good but also, coincident with the Good, of the Same and of the One. These three names reflect the way in which this one *arche* is at once the source of the normative status of the forms, of their self-sameness, and of both their own unity and their responsibility for what unity there is in the entities that instantiate them. Second, in Socrates' figure of the cave, the "womb"-like maternal counterpart to the paternal sun (212 ff.),⁵ she finds the image of Non-being and — just insofar as it is "on the loose [and] not involved in the order of Being" (213) — the source of evil. But, third, this latter qualification is crucial. As Brann goes on to argue, this second *arche* also *is* "involved in the order of Being," presenting itself, on the one hand, as the Indeterminate Dyad that sources the plurality that is unified by the One and, on the other hand, as the Other or Otherness that, as is first made explicit in the *Sophist*, gives Being its internal articulation as a field of forms, each of which is bound up with each other precisely *as* an "other" to it.

If the ongoing controversy over the status of the "so-called unwritten teachings"⁶ is indicative, many will have misgivings at this point. Does Brann's turn to these

⁴ Brann cites (178, n. 29) the seminal section, "The Dianoetic Extension of *Eikasia*," in Klein's *Commentary on Plato's Meno* (Chapel Hill, 1965), 115-125.

⁵ Brann, publishing this idea first in 1967 (see n. 1 above), thus precedes the remarkable polemic of Luce Irigaray, "Plato's *Hystera*," in *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris, 1974), translated by Gillian Gill as *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, 1985). For lucid discussion of Irigaray's reading, see Drew Hyland, *Questioning Platonism* (Albany, 2004), ch. 3.

⁶ The phrase is Aristotle's at *Physics* 209b14-15. Brann's critical openness to the reports of these "teachings" was especially daring in 1967, a time when the mainstream of Anglo-American classical philosophical scholarship, led by Harold Cherniss' *tour de*

"teachings" contradict her insistence on close attention to the contextual specificity and aporetic spirit of Socratic discourse in the dialogues? "... each dialogue," she remarks, "is, as it seems to me, a distinct conversational universe." (351) And of Socrates she writes, "He would not care so much about devising well-formulated breakthroughs for received issues as for staying with the inquiry at its origin in wonder." (41) Even some of those who share her openness to the "unwritten teachings" and are most in sympathy with the idea of dianoetic *eikasia* may nonetheless doubt that its practice — that is, reflection on the images of the sun, the line, and the cave in search of the eidetic and pre-eidetic order that is the original of which they are likenesses — can be sufficiently determinate to lead us back to the "meta-ontological" (213) play of the One and the Dyad.

Speaking for myself, I am sympathetic on two levels. Substantively, I think that some of the insights Brann comes to are in fact exhibited, at least in part, in texts that she does not address in this collection; this must be a topic for another time.⁷ More importantly, she qualifies her own daring with a genuinely Socratic reserve, and she complicates her own path with aporeticizing reflections that, far from blocking it, give it a potentially ultimate reach. In the closing lines of her Preface, Brann gives us a caution that, in fact, she has already expressed in a number of her essays:

... although this book is full of pretty confident interpretive conclusions concerning the Platonic text[s], in retrospect they all look more like preludes to new, perhaps deeper questions. (xiv)

To borrow a distinction she makes with regard to Socrates' talk about the forms, the very boldness of her characterizations of the Platonic *archai* is more that of "reaching" than of "describing" (340), more in the spirit of Socratic "suppositions" — that is, of the heuristic assumption of foundations that is meant to be put to the test by the very inquiry it orients — than of post-Platonic dogma. For evidence of the seriousness of this Socratic spirit, note the key reservations that Brann herself expresses about the reach of dianoetic *eikasia*. At two important moments in the book, in her essay on the treatment of imitative poetry in *Republic X* (chapter 9) and in her essay entitled "Plato's 'Theory of Ideas'" (chapter 13), she calls attention to the potential "trouble" (266) that the following

force rejection in *The Riddle of the Early Academy* (Berkeley, 1945) and Gregory Vlastos' skeptical review (included in *Platonic Studies* [Princeton, 1973]) of H. J. Krämer's *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles* (Heidelberg, 1959), was strongly inclined to dismiss them as, at best, informal working ideas and, at worst, a post-Platonic fabrication. The grounds for this closure have since been removed, in my opinion, by Kenneth Sayre's *Plato's Late Ontology: A Riddle Resolved* [Princeton, 1983], re-issued this year by Parmenides Publishing.

⁷ For treatments of the *Parmenides* and the *Statesman*, in each case with reference to the *Philebus*, see my "'Unwritten Teachings' in the *Parmenides*," *Review of Metaphysics* XLVIII, 3 (March 1995), 591-633 and my "Dialectical Education and 'Unwritten Teachings' in Plato's *Statesman*," especially in the version included in *The Philosopher in Plato's Statesman* (Las Vegas, 2004).

"apparently devastating difficult[y]" (339) will cause for dianoetic *eikasia* when it seeks an interpretation of the forms as originals: "If the *eidōs* is what is originally beautiful, and beautiful things are copies, ... then both have the quality of being beautiful." (339) And taking a second case, she asks, "Is the form of Sphericity a shiningly perfect sphere?" (266) Thus she points to the danger that in turning back from likeness to original, we key from the likeness and assimilate the original to it; or, more positively put, she alerts us to the fact that *the relation of original to likeness is itself a likeness* and that, accordingly, Plato gives us the task of turning our dianoetic *eikasia* against itself. If we fail to rise to this challenge, we will find ourselves in the situation of the youthful Socrates in the first part of the *Parmenides*: afflicted by the "insupportable redundancy ... of 'self-predication'" and the "Third Man" (339), we will be blocked from entering the noetic 'space' of Being. And thus blocked, we will be unable even to begin the dialectical thinking required for "a good journey and a path without obstacles" (*Philebus* 15c)⁸ in face of what Brann identifies as

our greatest problem: [understanding] how the *eidōs* drops down from the context of Being to become entangled with Nonbeing in a new and world-making way — how there can be an *eidōs* incarnate (*Phaedrus* 251a). (341)

It is deeply in the spirit of her appreciation of the "pedagogical generosity of the dialogues" (318) that Brann *both* guides us beyond the images of the sun, the line, and the cave to the "unwritten teachings" *and* preserves the nest of problems that the dialogues raise for those inclined to risk this reflection with her. In a summary list of "Socrates' presuppositions," she puts this "first and last, that where there is a question, an answer has already been at work, and it is our human task to recollect it." (342) Might it be the case that a heightened and sharpened inquiry into the problem of participation will itself turn into the "path" that leads the "knowing soul" into the noetic 'space' of Being and on to the One and the Dyad? To pursue this possibility — and, especially, to do so in response to the dianoetic "music" of the dialogues — would be, I think, to take up the "legacy" that Brann passes on in *The Music of the Republic*.

⁸ This phrase is drawn from *Philebus* 15b-c. Socrates is referring to the release from "every kind of perplexity and pathlessness" that one will gain if the issues he has just titled — namely, whether eidetic ones "truly are," how each can be the "one" that it is, and how each can be participated in by a dispersed plurality of things subject to becoming — can be "beautifully agreed on." That Socrates thus holds out hope for — or, indeed, takes as readily in reach — a resolution of the problem of participation is striking. Following Brann's recommendation (308), I quote from Seth Benardete's translation in *The Tragedy and Comedy of Life: Plato's Philebus* (Chicago, 1993).