“Unmodern Observations”

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It is worth remembering that the Athens that created Socrates also destroyed him. In the same vein, the first trial by a citizen jury, symbolic in Aeschylus’ Oresteia of the birth of democracy itself, ends in a tie. Greece is full of these lessons of tough love and would have it no other way. Do such tales embody tragic pessimism only? On the contrary, Aeschylus is trying to show that democracy is something that can never been taken for granted, never be assumed to work because of the pedigree of its name. History has proven this many times. After all, Adolf Hitler was democratically elected. Democracy is something that must be continuously reevaluated to be certain its ideals are embodied in its practice. Putting his own ideals to the test, Socrates chose to die rather than escape. That the city misapplied the laws in no way nullified the principle of the law itself. Laws represented ideals, lodestars, by which life and moral judgment should be guided. To break the law and run away would have made him no better than his accusers. For the Greeks, ideals are on no account invalidated by being virtual rather than actual.

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Socrates had something known as a daimon, a word in Greek meaning in-dwelling destiny, fate, even god. He would on occasion experience something that has today

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been likened to an epileptic fit. His daimon would suddenly take hold of him, he would freeze, and appear to be in a trance, or to be having a seizure. Then he would suddenly snap out of it. This would most often happen when he was on the verge of making an important decision. His daimon however always told him not to do something and never to do something. In other words, it was always negative, never positive.

This goes against our way of thinking about “inspiration,” which we would tend to think of as affirming rather than negating something. So what could the meaning of Socrates’ negative daimon be?

It may be more important to know what one does not want than to think one knows what one wants. A man who knows what he doesn’t want and what he won’t abide will not suffer all the impediments that stand between himself and what he does ultimately want, whether he can say what that is or not. Whereas the man who only knows what he wants, or thinks he knows what he wants, but doesn’t know what he doesn’t want, will suffer all the impediments that stand between him and what he ultimately wants. So the man who knows what he doesn’t want may actually come closer to realizing that elusive thing—what a man ultimately wants or aspires to—than the man who merely knows, or thinks he knows, what he wants. Socrates came closer to the truth by knowing what was untrue than by comforting himself with illusions.

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A Latin grammar book is a neat, orderly affair, a book of strictly-followed rules and regulations. One can see, studying the language, how the Romans could have ruled an empire comprising most of the known world for a thousand years. A Greek grammar book is an altogether different animal. It
must of necessity be many times the size of a Latin grammar. Upon closer scrutiny, one quickly discovers that it is not so much a book of grammatical rules as a book of exceptions to grammatical rules. The exceptions multiply in endless variety. Studying the language, one can see the soil from which everything exceptional about Greek culture grows, how they were a people dedicated to the principle of the exceptional. Thus Virgil can say in the *Aeneid* that Rome’s genius was empire, but that Greece would forever be its master in art. From the Greek language one can also see how they were a people who made rules so those rules could be broken. They not only lacked the disciplined uniformity needed to rule an empire, they at times lacked, in their pursuit of the original, the individual, and the exceptional, sufficient consensus to agree on almost anything amongst themselves.

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Rome conquered Greece, politically and militarily. But then Greece conquered Rome, culturally. In the early years of the empire no society on earth could withstand the power of Rome. They built not only an empire, but bridges, roads, sewage systems, aqueducts—what we today would call infrastructure—and managed an enormous bureaucratic organization. They moved the world in which they moved ahead by quantum leaps. Theirs was the power of empire, military genius, a rare talent for engineering, urban planning, and administrative organization. At its peak, the Roman Empire stretched north to Britain, south to Egypt, west to the Atlantic, and east nearly to the Caspian Sea—in other words, it comprised most of the known world.

Yet Greek forms and Greek ideas became the template upon which Rome fashioned and imagined itself. They provided the paradigms of perfection to which Rome aspired. A walk through any Roman sculpture gallery makes this abundantly clear: “Roman, 1st century AD, after the Greek original by . . .” It is no different in the realm of ideas. To study
rhetoric or philosophy in Rome was also to be schooled after the Greeks. Rome adapted and refined the mechanics, but Greece provided the original inspiration and form. The founding of America is a case in point. The founding fathers formally established America as a republic. The model of government for the republic they conceived was Rome. But the principles of equality and justice for all, our inalienable human rights that are the underlying principles of a representative democracy, are Greek. As we manage the complexities of modern life, political, social, and economic, we pay homage, in our work-a-day world, to Rome. But when we dream, we dream Greek.

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The creation story in the Bible tells how man began. But in the Greek creation story, as told by Hesiod in the *Theogony*, we never learn how man came to be. When man is first mentioned, it is in opposition to something, in this case, a world of monsters. He is the beast slayer, the dragon slayer—Perseus, Bellerophon, Heracles, Oedipus. We learn what man is through negative inference by seeing what he isn’t, what he opposes. Humanity is not therefore a given. It is something that must be forged in the crucible of struggle against that which threatens to destroy it. It is therefore dynamic and always in the process of being earned, recreated. Later in the *Theogony*, we learn that Zeus wants to destroy the race of man, utterly. He is opposed by Prometheus, who steals fire from Zeus (steals his “thunder” so to speak) and gives it to man. And so a new opposition arises between man and the gods themselves. Again, we see what man is by discovering what he isn’t: god. Neither god nor beast, his being is somehow defined by his heroic efforts at opposing both. He affirms what he is in the struggles with what he isn’t. Being human is therefore not something static or ever to be taken for granted, or assumed to be vouchsafed. It is something preciously maintained, and precious to the degree it is precarious.
No stories are more appealing than tales of heroes. Every culture, including our own, is replete with them. In ancient epics heroes like Beowulf swim oceans killing “whale fishes” along the way. When the heroes of Finnish epic, the Kalevala, bleed, they bleed rivers and floods. The Persian hero Rustum can down an entire ox with a single gulp, chased by a barrel of mead. Fantastic feats are the stuff of heroic tales. And while no less capable of marvelous deeds, the Greek hero, unlike that of almost every other culture, has come into this world for one purpose and one purpose alone: and that is to destroy himself. Even Heracles, the greatest of all, achieves immortality only after suffering an agonizing and human-all-too-human fate. The man who slays every monster barring his way to making the world safe for human habitation is defeated finally by the beast within himself: eros, love, desire. It literally burns him alive. While the heroes of every culture expand the parameters of what is believed to be possible, the Greek hero does so while at the same time reminding us of our human-all-too-human fate, reminding us, that is, of what it means to be human, the upper reaches but also the lower depths. And this is what makes the Greek hero’s ability to snatch the eternal from the desperately fleeting that much more remarkable.

The power of example was perhaps the greatest teacher in ancient Greece. This is why one often finds stories within stories, as when the heroes of one work are reminded of great deeds done by others who came before them. Even as the readers of the Iliad are reading its story, the heroes of Homer’s poem, like Achilles, are themselves reminded by the poet of an even greater, earlier generation of heroes, led by Heracles, who sailed to Troy before them. This is also how the mythical exempla of Greek tragedy work, offering
paradigms from more ancient stories to help put the trials of the hero into some kind of larger, more universalizing perspective. The hero Ajax remembers the heroic exploits of his even greater father, Telamon, and knows what he must do. Or, as a form of negation and contrast, the chorus in Euripides’ *Electra* tells the story of Perseus slaying the Gorgon Medusa to make the point emphatically that the hero of this play, Orestes, is no Perseus when he kills his mother Klytemnestra. The familiar motifs of Greek art, the scenes that one finds depicted almost universally on pottery or in relief sculpture, serve the same kind of paradigmatic function. It was not that the Greeks lacked for stories or images, but that they gravitated again and again to those particular stories that were exemplary, that typified universal memories or experiences. Even the stories Plato’s Socrates often tells, where he illustrates a point with a folksy anecdote or a homespun example, serve a similar purpose. They have the ring of the familiar and the universal about them. They are illustrative because they are exemplary, and universal because they are typical. Wherever one turns in ancient Greek culture, it is stories and the exempla they embody that serve the purpose of education, that instill the sense of that higher or larger self, through the power of example, universalizing and generic, toward which one ought to aspire. They show rather then merely tell. The Irish poet Yeats once said that art has taught more men how to die than oratory or the prayer book. It is the vividly familiar tale within a tale, or the pregnant dramatic moment captured in the frieze—the exempla that show the more ancient paradigmatic pattern of meaning—that, far from being evidence of artiness, or a sign of decadence, or a lack of imaginative variety, are the direct and powerful educative injunction, evoked through memory, of how a man should live or die.
When one travels around Greece and visits museums with collections of Greek art throughout the world, one often comes upon a curious scene: the battle of the Lapiths and the Centaurs. One finds it, for example, on the temple of Apollo at Bassae, on the west pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia, even the southern frieze of the Parthenon. The relative strangeness and obscurity of the story seems disproportionate to its prominence and ubiquity on the major temples and public buildings of Greece. The Lapiths, a mountain people from Thessaly supposedly descended from Apollo, arrange to marry their cousins. A savage tribe of centaurs, distantly related to the Lapiths, get wind of the celebration and decide to crash the party and, while they’re at it, abduct the brides. Naturally, a fierce battle ensues. In most representations, the centaurs appear to have the upper hand, except that Apollo himself makes an appearance and routs the centaurs with divine ease. Why does this strange and obscure tale feature so preeminently? It may be because it tells the story, with the utmost vividness, of the battle for the soul of man. On one side, the massively muscled contortion of centaurs, the beast, the retrogressive tug of man’s earthly origins, pulling him back and down. On the other, Apollo, the god, an oasis of equipoise and calm, who stands perfectly still, erect as a pillar, an uprightness to which man’s higher nature aspires. If one looks at the human figures on, say, the west pediment of the temple of Zeus, one will be struck by how often they are represented diagonally, as if on an incline, trying to strike a precarious balance as they are pulled in opposite directions by the competing claims of their higher and lower nature. It is nothing less than the signature of the soul, caught up eternally in the struggle to define humanity, the fatal balancing act, between the gravity of the beast and the sublimity of the god.
The Greek dramatic festivals took place in early spring, just as the earth was coming back to life after the deep chill of winter. Playwrights had to compete for the privilege of mounting a production. Each one “rehearsed a chorus” before the archons and the winners were given a green light. Costs were underwritten by a wealthy citizen on behalf of the city. Each dramatist was required to write and produce three tragedies and one satyr play. Only one complete satyr play and some fragmentary remains of others have survived antiquity. From the scant evidence, it would seem that they may have dealt with the same themes as the tragedies preceding them, but in a farcical way. Pure comedy, however, always had the last say. Just as night yields to day, the torch was passed to the Greek comic playwright, whose robust and earthy comedies rounded out the program. In other words, the Greek theater ran the full diapason of human experience. Every set of performances a long night’s journey into day. The one would not have been complete without the other. Light proved dark’s necessary foil. The unabashed tragedy of human life found its consolation, even redemption, in the irrepressible power and joy of life itself.

Delphi is almost invariably associated with the god Apollo and his sanctuary there. But in point of fact he occupied the shrine only nine months of the year, taking a good long vacation like a true Mediterranean. The other three months of the year, the shrine belonged to the god Dionysus, who was in some sense his antithesis. Apollo was a god of revelation, clarity, and order. Dionysus, a god of the life energies exceeding all those boundaries established by the ordering principle of Apollo. The Greek sense of order was large enough to include the disruptive but refreshing disorder that kept that sense of order from ossifying into some sort of lifeless ortho-
doxy of values or beliefs. As Nietzsche put it, only the man with chaos inside can ever give birth to a dancing star. When we move from late winter into spring, we have entered the season of Dionysus. He then resides at the Delphic omphalos and it is to him we pay homage. The renewal of the earth, erupting everywhere in blossoming magnolia and cherry trees, forsythias and azaleas, tulips, daffodils, and hyacinths. Legend has it that the latter was created by Apollo, even though it blooms in the season of Dionysus, a handsome young man with curly hair whom Apollo decided to make eternal in the form of the flower. One day, on a whim, the god threw a discus so high and so hard it split open his young friend’s head when it came down. With one stroke he made the flower and spilt the blood that colors it. The two gods are not so dissimilar where inflicting pain is concerned. Suffering is part and parcel of the experience of Dionysus. His primitive rites were celebrated by the sparagmos, the rending to pieces, of a ritual victim. And in myth he himself is torn limb from limb by the Giants, but to be reborn. The Middle Ages saw the deep connection between the suffering associated with this god and the passion of Christ. An early medieval dramatic work known as the *Christus Patiens*, the Passion of Christ, is an adaptation of Euripides’ tragedy about Dionysus, *The Bacchae*, grafting onto the figure of Christ, almost word for word, the suffering of Dionysus’ victim Pentheus. The rebirth of the earth in spring and the fertility of the Easter bunny belong to the season of Dionysus, but also our deepest reflections on human suffering, not least the passion, but also the resurrection, of Christ. It was Nietzsche again who said that from the smile of Dionysus arose the Olympian gods but from his tears sprang man.

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In 493 BC the Greek tragedian, Phrynicus, a disciple of Thespis and predecessor of Aeschylus, produced his play *The Fall of Miletus* in Athens. Miletus in Asia Minor had been a lead-
ing colony of Athens. Only the year before, the city had fallen to the Persians and was now part of their vast empire. The play was said to have brought the entire city of Athens to tears. But instead of being rewarded for his theatrical coup he was instead levied a stiff fine.

He was not fined because he made the city of Athens weep. He was fined because he had reminded the Athenians only of their own troubles. The playwright’s proper job was to present the human story—including that of the city’s woes—from the broadest and most universal perspective, through a lens not its own. Only from this can fresh insight and deeper understanding follow.

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In a document called “The Seventh Letter,” Plato makes a remarkable claim: that he never wrote what he really meant to say. How is posterity supposed to understand this? And does this make reading his Dialogues an exercise in futility? Perhaps the answer to this lies in the word dialogue itself. The texts themselves are just this: dramatic dialogues. Different characters, in sometimes very particular settings or detailed circumstances, tell different stories and argue different points of view. Socrates almost always prevails, but his words cannot be separated from the contexts in which they are spoken or the particulars to which they are addressed. In other words, it is difficult to abstract them. The truth, or what Plato “meant to say,” or meant Socrates to say, lies somewhere in between the utterance and the process by which it’s delivered—in the dramatic dialogue or, in Greek, through the process of dialegesthai. One spark ignites another, one thought leads to another. The reader is carried along by and engaged in the drama that unfolds. The final formulation is less important than the dialectical process that has brought us there, since it too raises even larger questions than it answers. And so the argument continues in one’s own mind after his dramatis personae have left the
page. Which is exactly what Plato intended and what he meant by saying he never wrote what he meant to say.

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In both substance and in symbol the Athenian victory at the battle of Marathon was and is one of freedom over tyranny. Had the Persians, who at that time ruled the greatest empire the world had ever known, won the day, the world we now inhabit might never have come to be. Athens would have been only another subject territory of Persia, and not the birthplace of the liberal habits of mind from which Western Civilization arose. Without pausing to think about that celebrated victory, people the world over know Marathon by the twenty-six-mile race named after it, the reenactment by amateur and world-class runners of Pheidippides’ famous breathless run from the battlefield to Athens to announce the Greek victory, after which he instantly dropped dead. But only Plutarch tells this story. Herodotus has Pheidippides running all the way to Sparta (a good deal further away than Athens) for the purpose of summoning its help—which help was not to be forthcoming. But the real “marathon” was surely those twenty-six miles that the Athenians soldiers ran, after inflicting heavy losses on the Persians by fighting an exhausting and ferocious battle, still fully loaded with armor and carrying all their heavy gear, some of them badly wounded, back to Athens to protect it. There was no time for celebrating or resting. One setback wasn’t likely to deter the King of Persia, ruler of the greatest empire in the world. With the Athenian troops at Marathon, and Persia in control of the seas, Athens was an easy target. And so, weary from battle, they ran all the way back. These men weren’t professional athletes. They weren’t even professionally trained soldiers. They were just incredibly tough—and tough-minded—extraordinary ordinary men—men who believed in something—something worth living for and worth dying for. On Marathon day, let us think not of the great runner Pheidippides, but of the or-
ordinary men who performed a miracle at Marathon and then brought home and saved a dream called Athens.*

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Someone once wrote of the future that it is a void: the future is what the present, pushed roughly by the past, falls flat in. Our eyes are almost always turned to, and our talk is almost always preoccupied with, the future. Ours is a forward, rather than backward, looking civilization. Although, as Milan Kundera once wrote, “people are always shouting they want to create a better future. It’s not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, to provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past.” In Greek mythology, the nine Muses inspire and represent all the arts and intellectual faculties and skills that distinguish men from, and elevate them above, the world of animals. The nine Muses are all born of one mother, whose name is Mnemosyne, and who is goddess of what her name means: Memory. In some profound sense, the Greeks understood that all our higher faculties, and inventive ingenuity, and even our sense of futurity, derive from a negotiation with the past. The past isn’t dead. It isn’t even passed.

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