

Recuperating the Platonic Idea

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This paper arises out of the methodological concern for how one can today read Plato. Having encountered a Platonic reference in the curious phrase, “erotic anamnesis” in the first pages of Giorgio Agamben’s book *The Coming Community* (1990),¹ it occurred to me that in spite of being quite familiar with Plato, I could not locate its precise source. After some cursory research, I realized that the phrase is unique to Agamben’s text, and though I discovered it had been quoted by others in secondary texts, its Platonic context had been either taken for granted or completely lost. A return to Plato seemed in order, but not without some unease. This return seemed impossible without addressing the questions of why I felt the need to authenticate Agamben’s theory in this way in the first place. Even more so, why in my own reading of Plato should I bother attempting to do what so many others have done before and so much better than me? Why the move backwards?

Like mine, it would seem that most critical inquiries into aesthetic theory will inevitably encounter Plato in some form or other, be it simply as a footnote or as foundational to another argument. Carrying the title ‘father of Western philosophy’ with all of its negative patriarchal baggage, Socrates, through his avatar of Plato, has become so integral to the Western academic tradition that many of the notions commonly attributed to him are generally presumed rather than investigated.² More often than not, he appears simply as a reference, a big picture or thematic that is rarely discussed in textual detail. And for good reason. There would be little space for anything new if every critical inquiry that did encounter a reference to Plato were required to examine it in detail. Further, would this type of engagement in itself not amount to the unwelcome rehearsal of those principles that most would seek to distance themselves from? Would it not affirm the authenticity of Plato’s patriarchal authority and validate the normative genealogy of philosophy that places him at its origin?

¹ “The movement that Plato describes as erotic anamnesis is the movement that transports the object not toward another thing or another place, but toward its own taking-place—toward the Idea.”

² Such notions include the privileging of soul over body, the existence of absolute truth, and the Idea as an otherworldly form merely imitated by an inferior earthly counterpart.

Conversely, ignoring the problem of the endurance of Plato does not necessarily remove the obstacle he presents. By addressing him with silence, it can be argued that one leaves the Platonic canon to remain canonical, a territory reserved for interpretation by our other great philosophical patriarchs while Classical Studies scholars are seen to bicker about its minutiae. It would seem that neither engaging with nor ignoring Plato are sufficient, leaving the thematic treatment intact with all of its presuppositions of Plato's intent. This very general though omnipresent problematic is ultimately not limited to Plato. One can substitute the names Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger for his, perhaps even Foucault and Derrida as well. But, of course, in the work of each of these thinkers one will find reference to Plato. The problem is actually a question of origin. To what degree, if any, must one investigate the source of the theories that inform one's own argument?

Returning to Plato, however, a close reading of the dialogues reveals that the Platonic constructs mentioned do not rest on so solid a platform. The dialogues are simply not so uniform. The Idea, for instance, makes an appearance in a number of works in addition to its most celebrated in the *Republic*, including *Cratylus*, *Parmenides*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, and the *Seventh Letter* (circa fourth century BCE), each defining it more or less differently. And though the tendency in modern history has often been to reduce all manifestations into one single concept perhaps most clearly evident in *Cratylus* 389a-b wherein the archetypal Idea informs its earthly manifestation,³ this is only sustainable when speaking in the most general terms. Classicists have dealt with this problem by delving into philological detail and/or attempting to devise an accurate timeline of the dialogues to ascertain Plato's last, and thus most authentic, description of the Idea. Yet even this method is rife with difficulty as some of Plato's texts are not only of contested date but also contested authorship. It would seem then that there is neither an authentic reading of the Theory of Ideas nor an authentic Theory of Ideas at all. However, the problem remains of how to read Plato, or any philosophical figurehead, without involving oneself in directly countering its played-out presuppositions or affecting a

³ SOCRATES: ...To what does the carpenter look in making a shuttle? Does he not look to that which is naturally fitted to act as a shuttle?

HERMOGENES: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And suppose the shuttle to be broken in making. Will he make another, looking to the broken one? Or will he look to the form according to which he made the other?

HERMOGENES: To the latter, I should imagine.

SOCRATES: Might not that justly be called the true or ideal shuttle?

- Plato, *Cratylus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Princeton University Press 1973:427

quest for a more authentic meaning. In my own agonizing over this dilemma as it pertains to my research, quite fortuitously I have found an answer within the very material of my study. The early work of Walter Benjamin has proven to be particularly instructive on two counts. First, he elaborates a rich and unconventional reading of the Idea that rather unsettles the commonly held position that it is a heavenly archetype. Second, he employs this reading to devise a theory of origin that seems to bypass the need to rehearse any tropes associated with the material addressed.

In his 1923 essay, 'The Task of the Translator', itself an introduction to his translation of selected poems from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), Benjamin states that art "posits man's physical and spiritual existence, but in none of its works is it concerned with his response. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener."⁴ Though this text takes as its subject translation, a most tangible application of relationality, the question of audience response or participation according to the terms laid out above is simply unimportant. His discourse on the communicability of works of art does not hinge upon the active engagement of participants but privileges the works themselves, without proposing any formal specifications that would qualify one work above another.

Benjamin proposes a relationality that disregards any teleological finitude in a determined comprehension by a receiver, yet remains stubbornly attached to the prominence of the original. He likens the relationship of the translation and the original to the point at which a tangent touches a circle, explaining that: "a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the linguistic flux."⁵ While the translation moves as a trajectory through pure language, the original remains unchanged,

⁴ "In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. Not only is any reference to a particular public or its representatives misleading, but even the concept of an "ideal" receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art, since all it posits is the existence and nature of man as such. Art, in the same way, posits man existence, but in none of its works is it concerned with his attentiveness. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the audience."

- Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's Tableaux parisiens*, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2004:253

⁵ "What remains for sense, in its importance for the relationship between translation and original, may be expressed in the following simile. Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point—establishing with this touch rather than the point, the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity—a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux"

- Benjamin, *Task of the Translator*, 261

a closed circle, and may be the source of other translations, defining new trajectories. Further, translations themselves are untranslatable as they are too diffuse, lacking the consistency of meaning possessed by the original.⁶ Benjamin's attention to the material aspect of the relational character of translation in his concern for the original discloses an affinity with the tension between the general and the specific present in the Platonic Idea. However, unlike the Idea of *Cratylus*, it is an infinitesimal friction rather than imitation that founds this relation.

The question of origin and the Platonic Idea are addressed in greater depth in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' to his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1924-25), in which Benjamin defines origin as an historical category that describes, "that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance," rather than, "the process by which the extant came into being." Origin is neither a birth nor a cause, thus no legitimate ancestry can be attributed to it. While some object may have evolved in a certain way as manifest in its past and subsequent history, this has nothing to do with any teleological determination inherent in that object by way of origin. Furthermore, though it is related to the history and subsequent development of factual findings, origin is not discovered by the examination of them. Instead, origin exists in the world of essences and does not necessarily take on the purest form in the world of fact.⁷

However, for Benjamin this does not make origin any less authentic. Indeed, he states that the authentic is the hallmark of origin in phenomena and this authenticity is: "the object of discovery which is connected in a unique way with the process of recognition." In his words, "the act of discovery can reveal it in the most singular and eccentric phenomena, in both the weakest and the clumsiest experiments and in the overripe fruits of a period of decadence."⁸ While Benjamin is here alluding specifically to

⁶ "The higher the level of a work, the more it remains translatable even if its meaning is touched upon only fleetingly. This, of course, applies to originals only. Translations, in contrast, prove to be untranslatable not because of any inherent difficulty but because of the looseness with which meaning attaches to them"

- Benjamin, *Task of the Translator*, 262

⁷ "Origin, although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual: its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete."

- Walter Benjamin, "Epistemo-Critical Prologue," in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, Verso, London and New York 1998:45

⁸ "The authentic—the hallmark of the origin in phenomena—is the object of discovery, a discovery which is connected in a unique way with the process of recognition. And the act of discovery can reveal it in the most singular and eccentric of phenomena, in both the weakest and clumsiest experiments and in the

the German mourning play, which he is prefacing with this methodological discourse, it is a rather egalitarian gesture on his part to suggest that authenticity manifest as origin may be recognized anywhere and in anything.

As he explains:

That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand, it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete.⁹

Herein lies the tension with authenticity. Origin must simultaneously be something that is to be restored, and yet remain incomplete. The moment of recognition through this dual insight in the relationship of the individual to the Idea is its “Platonic Redemption.” Benjamin here proposes the idea of origin as the Platonic Idea, displacing imitation with reciprocity. The authentic origin is the instant of friction between the original and the translation.

He goes on to state that this authenticity of origin can only be represented in the object’s philosophical history, the form in which all of the possible meaningful juxtapositions of the opposites of the remotest extremes and apparent excesses of its development have been explored.¹⁰ This representation, however, is always restricted to the virtual because the history of an origin is inward in character, finite, and specific to itself and its content and not the circumstances that have befallen it. This “natural history” is unclouded by human life, it is essence, only accessible as a virtuality. In a particularly arcane passage, he states:

Once this redeemed state of being in the idea is established then the presence of the inauthentic—that is to say natural-historical—past and subsequent history is virtual. It is no longer pragmatically real, but, as

overripe fruits of a period of decadence.”

- Benjamin, *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, 46

⁹ See note 5.

¹⁰ “Philosophical history, the science of the origin, is the form which, in the remotest extremes and the apparent excesses of the process of development, reveals the configuration of the idea—the sum total of all possible meaningful juxtapositions of such opposites. The representation of an idea can under no circumstances be considered successful unless the whole range of possible extremes it contains has been virtually explored.”

- Benjamin, *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, 47

natural history, is to be inferred from the state of completion and rest, from the essence.¹¹

Natural history is thus inauthentic apart from its entry into realm of Ideas; it is virtual and this is the condition of our understanding of it, at best as represented as its philosophical history. Only in the instantaneous and unintentional relationship between the individual and the idea can there be any experience of authenticity, a necessarily mediated experience.

Elsewhere in the text, Benjamin elaborates upon the question of the Platonic Idea, which he describes as fundamental to any investigation into the philosophy of art.¹² While the Ideas are represented through the medium of empirical reality, this representation is limited to a relation of configuration—“an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept”¹³ thus a relation that preserves the distinction between these elements that is not contingent upon the Idea itself. Here, the prevalent understanding of the specific as it appears in empirical reality as a mere imitation informed by the archetypal immortal Idea is no longer valid.

Further, distinguishing truth from knowledge, truth is constituted in a state of discontinuous finitude and, as a sudden illumination, is evident only upon its entry into the realm of Ideas,¹⁴ but in no way can this phenomenon be a product of the intention of a subject. And so, for all practical purposes, we are confined to the inauthentic with the hope that the Idea may appear. This confinement, as a sort of necessary limit, holds the promise of the authentic.

While origin, likened to the frisson of “an eddy in the stream of becoming,” is, even within the context of philosophical inquiry, apparently impossible to grasp with any intent, this imbues it with a certain autonomy. Though it is generally considered as point A in a teleology, for Benjamin, it is not some originary immediate present; in fact, it

¹¹ Benjamin, *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, 47

¹² “An understanding of the Platonic view of the relationship of truth and beauty is not just a primary aim in every investigation into the philosophy of art, but it is indispensable to the definition of truth itself.”

- Benjamin, *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, 30

¹³ “For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements.”

- Benjamin, *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, 34

¹⁴ “This is the sense in which he [Plato] argues that truth is the content of beauty. This content, however, does not appear by being exposed; rather it is revealed in a process which might be described metaphorically as the burning up of the husk as it enters the realm of ideas, that is to say a destruction of the work in which its external form achieves its most brilliant degree of illumination.”

- Benjamin, *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, 31

encompasses all time. This recalls his metaphor of the circle and the tangent from ‘The Task of the Translator’. The circle as a point of origin is defined by its contact with the tangent, but remains indifferent and unchanged in relation to it, illuminated only by that touch.

In a most fantastic and rich way, Benjamin performs his theory of origin within his treatment of the Platonic Idea, itself the source of the theory. Though, as he acknowledges in the first pages of the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’, while the cognitional element of the Platonic system has long since lost any claim to scientific truth, it still possesses contemporary relevance.¹⁵ This relevance is not found in any claim to the truth of its precepts, but rather, in that it may still yield new precepts that have contemporary relevance. I have found this to be true in my own reading of Plato. While it is difficult to conceive of enacting Benjamin’s concept of origin as a methodology, it nonetheless demonstrates how origin can disrupt the precepts that have informed an entire historical trajectory of thought as in the generalizations of the Platonic canon, without ever countering these precepts directly.

Returning to the initial questions of how to approach Plato and how to justify this effort, the highly generalized problematic that I outlined presumes those Platonic constructs as an inherent limit in the study of Plato with the present dominant reading of Plato treated as an obstacle to the text itself. However, this conundrum of the rejection of Plato as a consequence of the rejection of what are taken to be Platonic constructs may be a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. In light of Benjamin’s origin, rather than countering, ignoring, or tacitly complying with those precepts about Platonic thought that are taken for granted, I believe there may still be the possibility to represent the conjunction of Plato and Agamben as an origin in his work, without either falling into the trap of needing to summarize the entire history of metaphysics (beginning with its father through all of his progeny), or inattentively attempting to translate his translation.

¹⁵ “This relationship between truth and beauty shows more clearly than anything else the great difference between truth and the object of knowledge, with which it has customarily been equated, and at the same time it provides an explanation of that simple and yet unpopular fact that even those philosophical systems whose cognitional element has long since lost any claim to scientific truth still possess contemporary relevance. In the great philosophies the world is seen in terms of the order of ideas. But the conceptual frameworks within which this took place have, for the most part, long since become fragile. Nevertheless these systems, such as Plato’s theory of ideas, Leibniz’s monadology, or Hegel’s dialectic, still remain valid as attempts at a description of the world.”

- Benjamin, *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, 32

But, more crucially, herein is the possibility to simply read Plato: to read Plato without presuming to challenge or produce any more authentic a reading than of those that have read him before me or those that will do so after, and to read Plato attentively with pleasure and enthusiasm. It is not about surpassing the dilemma of authenticity, and it is not about maintaining a willful ignorance of or rejecting the efforts of authentication surrounding the Platonic corpus. It is about finding a way to read Plato that may demonstrate and destabilize the persistent hold that his canon has, however implicitly, on contemporary aesthetic thought. The strategy is to undermine rather than overcome.