

Pages from the Textbook of Alternate History: Plato, King of Syracuse

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When Dionysus II first offered to Plato the city of Syracuse, jewel of Sicily, for the philosopher to rule as his own, there was a moment of hesitation. The last time Plato had come to Sicily, he was thrown into prison and sold into slavery. But this time, after much dialogue with his students, and a sober visit to the temple of Athena, he agreed to leave his beloved Akademe and to make the utopia of his famed *Republic* a living reality.

Though Plato was given Syracuse to rule as his own, Dionysus continued to control all of Sicily and, as emperor of Sicily, levied high taxes on the city's production, which the utopia could not support.

Demosthenes, an orator and former student of Plato's, wrote this account of Plato's first days as ruler of Syracuse, in his series on kings. The portrayal of Plato offered here suggests that the king of Syracuse was a greater philosopher than he was a ruler of men.

At the first meeting of the Nocturnal Council, there was barely any light from the Mediterranean dawn, and all the philosopher kings stood around looking weary. But Theocritus, poet of Syracuse, stood amongst them, eyes peeled wide, with his shepherd thinness and obsidian skin from years of toiling in the Sicilian sun— as Theocritus was once a laborer, and the only native of Syracuse among this crowd.

“Guardians of Syracuse,” he said, speaking loudly to compensate for the gestures which were lost to the near-dark, “I do not bring my troubles here to burden you, but to show respect for your place in the new state. It is my loyalty to Syracuse— no matter who rules her— that guides me.”

At this moment, Plato’s eyes wandered— not so as to suggest a waning of his attention, but so as to gauge the reaction of the councillors. Eloquence in oratory being yet another reason to root out the sophistic influence of the false poet.

“Yesterday, Xenocrates came to my home, as a representative of this council, and sat with me and my sons. After drinking of the milk from my cattle, and eating of the herbs from my garden, this noble guardian informed me that I was to cease hereafter the writing of poetry. In one breath, Xenocrates meant to erase both my livelihood and my legacy. His reason for demanding such a revolution in my affairs? For the good of the children of Syracuse!”

Theocritus then turned to face Xenocrates directly, whom he identified even in the dimness. “I have raised four sons into men— men of Syracuse who have fought in two of our wars, and one of whom died for the honor of Greece. I know what I have done for the children of Syracuse. What of you, Xenocrates?”

Plato then stepped forward and took Theocritus in hand, as if the proceedings of the court were merely a conversation between the two— a teacher and his student, walking among the pillars of the Parthenon in a distant Akkadian city.

“Theocritus, all that we decide, we decide for the good of Syracuse. We do not impose laws at the expense of freedom, but

we mean to persuade you of the rightness of acting according to these laws. Would you agree that a just society is a society that voluntarily adheres to its laws?"

"I would."

"So then it would follow that the crucial point in this matter is not whether you can be compelled to act according to our wishes, but whether we can persuade you of our point of view regarding the writing of poetry."

"I would say so, yes, but it will be exceedingly difficult to change my mind concerning the virtues of poetry."

"I am glad that you are quick to speak of virtue, Theocritus. I am especially keen to know whether you believe that poetry can inspire us toward the virtues of courage, wisdom, moderation, and justice."

"I do believe it," said Theocritus.

"Would you agree that poetry can also inspire us toward the corruption of virtue— cowardliness, idiocy, excess, and injustice?"

"I cannot think of an instance where it has, but I would say that it is possible."

Plato smiled, avuncularly, at the younger man. "So if good poetry instructs us in the virtues, and bad poetry instructs us in the corruption of virtues, would you agree that poetry has the potential for both positive and negative influence?"

Theocritus' eyes lit up. "But this is precisely my point, Plato. That poetry can be used constructively or destructively, like anything else. We cannot forbid the use of the hammer just because the hammer can also be used to draw blood."

“But, Theocritus, in the case of poetry, it is possible to separate the good uses from the bad. Would you be opposed even to the censorship of bad poetry?”

“I would,” said Theocritus.

“Are you so fond of bad poetry that you wish to promote it, though it distracts us from the good?”

“I am not so fond of bad poetry, as you say, but it is necessary that a poet remain free to write poorly so that he may write well.”

“It seems to me that this is a sophistic statement,” said Plato, who by his tone, appeared to sense that the two men were speaking obliquely.

“Even so,” said Theocritus, narrowing his eyes to indicate his resolve.

Plato looked up, to see the sun crowning over a line of trees in the distance. “Will you agree to meet again, you and I, to decide what is an appropriate degree of self-censorship in the writing of poetry?”

Theocritus furrowed his brow. He came to the council fully expecting a fight, or worse, a trial and execution, as Dionysus would have had it. The heat in his chest and his hands bespoke a readiness for action. His body was disappointed by the aspect of peace it wore now.

So, the matter having been settled for the moment, and the sun rising swiftly above Sicily, the Nocturnal Council dispersed and Theocritus returned home.

Plato stood straight and pacific with a cane in his left hand. The conceit of this, the vanity, was one of the few indulgences he permitted himself as an old man. The fallow land below was spotted here and there with stations where young Syracusans practiced their gymnastics, looking from this vantage like so many figures in an oriental tapestry.

There were so many pleasures to be had from the looking, Plato thought. In another life, he might have been content merely to observe, but his circumstance demanded that he become the instrument of change in the world he had imagined long ago. He walked down the path to the sandy field, accompanied by Adeimantus and Xenocrates, where all the youths gathered immediately around.

If there was one thing Plato disliked about the founding of a new Syracuse, it was the speech-making. Though oratory was taught in his Akademe, and though his principles supported it, he found it to be personally distasteful. His penchant was, always, for dialogue and exchange. When it came down to it, he hated to espouse anything— he preferred the give and take of two honest souls in intellectual communion.

“Athletics are perfect,” Plato reminded them. “Health cannot lead to illness, nor can illness come from health. It is impossible by definition.”

“Reason is perfect,” Plato said, “because it leads us to the true and the just . . .” He continued.

After Plato spoke, a skinny boy with lazy eyelids approached, saying, “I am Dido, youngest son of Theocritus. I have heard the teachers say that, in our poesis, the writing of poetry should not be undertaken because of its falsity. My father is a poet by profession; is he then a liar?”

Plato invited Xenocrates to walk with him. “Shall this be our first act at the founding of the new Syracuse? Convincing children that their fathers are dishonorable men?”

“It was made clear to me that the first priority of the ideal state is the education of children,” said Xenocrates, evasively.

“And the education of men.”

“Yes. And Theocritus’ versifying is full of a falsity that corrupts the virtues, as you have established.”

“True. Theocritus writes with indifference to the perfection of society, because we have not taught him to do otherwise. But you, Xenocrates, have done us a greater disservice, by using the authority of the council to compel him to do so.”

“I did as you asked, Plato, and endeavored to compel him to our view. But Theocritus . . .”

“Not compulsion,” said Plato, “but education. We have perceived the truth ourselves through the rigorous pursuit of it. Now we must impart that truth to others. It is our duty. Anything but the pursuit of the good, in ourselves as well as in others, is unjust.”

“I think you will find Theocritus immune to education,” said Xenocrates, smiling.

“I have seen greater changes take place in this world than one man’s opinions,” said Plato, accepting the terms of the implied challenge.

“Yes,” said Xenocrates mistily, “This world is full of improbable things.”

Plato and Theocritus sat alone among the ivy-covered stones. Occasionally, Theocritus would stand up and pace back and forth on the gravel. Plato, forever at peace with the contents of his mind, remained seated with the cane on his lap.

“What about my bucolics? How can a pastoral poem about the love of a goatherd be said to lead to the loss of virtue?” Theocritus asked.

“It is not the goatherd’s love that is corrupting, but the transformations of the gods in the poem. The gods are perfect in their own form, and any transformation in them is a diminishment. To suggest that the gods diminish

themselves is false. The stories we tell to children are full of such metamorphoses, and this is precisely the sort of story that perpetuates these myths. The young, who cannot distinguish between truth and falsehood, will learn to disrespect the gods, and to barter in lies.”

Theocritus scowled, in spite of himself. “What of Homer? Is the poetry of Homer a lie?”

“The poetry of Homer is not only a lie,” said Plato, “it is a bad lie.”

“I do not see how I can converse with a man who is so hostile to poetry that he cannot see the good in Homer,” Theocritus said, raising his voice in incredulity, while Plato remained steady and calm. “You yourself— an Athenian!— grew into manhood reciting the poetry of Homer, yet you are able to find virtue in your own nature. How can that be, if the ‘bad lies’ of Homer have been corrupting you for all these years?”

“Truly, it was through the education of Socrates.”

“And Socrates? Didn’t he grow up hearing and repeating the words of Homer?”

“I do not know by what divine wisdom Socrates lifted himself out of the cave of illusions and onto the firm ground of truth; nor how he came to return among us and impart that selfsame wisdom to the citizens of Athens. But I would not turn my back on his wisdom, simply because he was once privy to the same epic lies as all Greeks.”

“So how then do I compose poetry in a way that corresponds to your wishes?”

“By aspiring toward the good, and pointing the hearer towards the ideal.”

“Why would I write only of the ideal, and ignore the reality that I see around me? Isn’t it your assertion that the aspiration of poetry should be truth— all truths? Which is it that you are against, Plato? Falseness, or reality? It seems to me that you are an opponent of both.”

“Simulation of reality is falsity. Furthermore, it is sophism. Sophism is worse than plain ignorance or plain falsehood, because it pretends at truth and it persuades us of the false. Just so, poetry that pretends at reality, but comes only near enough to convince us that the illusion is the reality, is sophistic.”

Theocritus paused, looking upward, as though the sigil of the gods were written on the stars, if he could only decipher it. “I think I have an inkling of your meaning, Plato. When I hear a lesser poet imitate my work, the result is a mockery of the original. Even if the imitation is close to the mark— especially if it is close, without retaining the spirit of the former— the result is all the more offensive.”

“And worse,” said Plato, placing his hand affectionately at the knee of his charge, “the innocent listener, when they finally come to hear the original, will be so tainted with the imitation that he will not know the difference.”

Theocritus sighed, and shook his head. “I will try, dear Plato, for your sake, to write poetry that aspires to the good, that is not merely mimetic, but ideal, even if it should mean an end to poetry.”

“Yes. Reality is sufficient, and it does not need our embellishment,” said Plato somewhat distractedly.

“It will be difficult for me to turn my eyes from the reality I observe around me, Plato, and write only of abstract and ideal things, but I will try.”

“And that is all that I ask,” said Plato, patting the other on the shoulder, then using his cane to stand, “Now, I must cut short our disputation for the sake of the state. I have other affairs to attend to at the moment.”

As Theocritus bade him farewell, and Plato took the first rise on the path in the slow way of a philosopher, he could not resist glancing smugly and sidelong toward Xenocrates, who walked quietly beside him.

Meanwhile, as history records, Dionysus II had landed in Syracuse and sat awaiting Plato in the main palace. It was dark by the time Plato returned.

“And where were you off to this night, Plato, King of Syracuse?” asked Dionysus, enunciating king with all the subtlety of a blunt instrument.

“Ah, Dionysus, but I am not King. You gave me Syracuse to rule as I see fit, and I have instituted a guardianship consisting of thirty members. I am merely one of thirty.”

“I am most eager to see how you control the population of the city. You will have a difficult time, I think, cutting Syracuse down to only 5,040 citizens.”

“A perfect society such as we have imagined has never been seen before on earth. It will take considerable time, and even then, it will never fulfill the ideal,” Plato reasoned.

“And was it the perfect society that kept me waiting so long for your return?”

“Alas, that was Theocritus, the poet, whom I am instructing in the truth.”

Dionysus' demeanor instantly changed. That was his fearsomest quality— how suddenly his emotion shifted with the news. “When I made you King of Syracuse, the only condition I put upon you was that you take no other students but me! And not a month has passed before you take on another?”

“Theocritus is not a student, but a citizen. I am instructing him in the manner that a king instructs his subjects.”

“But I am a king, and I instruct no one,” Dionysus said.

Plato looked at him as if to say he didn't doubt it.

Dionysus' face shifted again, and he extended an arm to the venerable Athenian. “Let us move to the agora to discuss our affairs, as they did in ancient times?”

“Let's,” said Plato, his profound calm unsettled by the volatility of the King of Sicily, whom he would always remember as an eleven-year old child, making unreasonable and arbitrary demands upon everyone within his voice's considerable range.

They strolled out from the palace into the commons, and to the agora where merchants and their slaves jostled each other and passersby for space. The Syracusans— who had bowed at the feet of kings for centuries— knelt as the great men passed in front of them, though Plato knelt with them and reminded them, once again, that Syracuse no longer has a king.

“I would have thought you could have done more by now,” said Dionysus, after a while. When Dionysus spoke, he began at a whisper, so that the listener was bade lean toward him, but soon rose to an ear-piercing crescendo, as though before a crowd. “But it has been weeks and you have not proven anything but your own idleness.

You spent the day conversing with a poet? Not even many poets, but a single poet? This while the rest of Sicily harvested (and what is more, made a gift to us of a portion of each harvest)?"

"I did not accept your proposition to rule Syracuse merely because I wanted to test my philosophical assumptions, with respect, King Dionysus," said Plato, "but rather, because it follows my principles—that consequence must proceed from true ideas."

"You miss my meaning, Plato. For a great philosopher, you have a remarkable capacity to self-deceive. So that I am not mistaken again, allow me to educate you: if you do not tithe half of your earnings to us, then I will be forced to reconquer Syracuse in the name of Dionysus."

Plato stood dumb. His speechlessness was, for Dionysus, the reward for all his efforts.

"Perhaps if you weren't so busy meddling with poets, you would have already trained your warriors and gone off to conquests of your own," Dionysus said.

"If a man is to be honored for his virtues, his promises must not be conditional," Plato reasoned, for the benefit of his former student.

But the look in Dionysus' eye repealed argument, confounded logic, and damned reason to futility. Like the cold, unblinking stare of a fish, it seemed to say, appetite is all.

Plato looked down, while the activity of the agora bustled all around him. There, he saw only a patch of dirt and his own sandaled feet. "So this is it? You offer me Syracuse to make into the Magnesia of my ideals, just so that you can prove my notions a failure by force? Did you give up Syracuse because you wished to conquer her twice?" And this, much to his own surprise—for Plato was not a weak man,

but bred to war like every other Greek— brought the salt to his eyes. Among warriors, Spartans, among even the Persian hordes, Plato had encountered cruelty such as he believed unparalleled in the civilized world. Yet here, the joy with which the conqueror announced his next conquest brought new depth to his understanding of evil.

Oh, the philosopher reduced to tears! The boy-king standing revealed as a tyrant while his mentor sobs into the folds of his chiton! Would that there were only a poet left to tell his tale!

Demosthenes, though a pupil of Plato's, and one of his strongest supporters, acknowledges that the philosopher's influence declined after the fall of Syracuse. Appeals to the public, to show how Syracuse was never given a real chance to flourish, fell on deaf ears. The people wanted this to become yet another lesson on the limits of philosophy. Beyond Sicily, beyond Peloponnesia, the ancients ridiculed "empty theorizing" and "intellectualism," and applauded themselves, each and all, for remaining men of action.

Suggestions for Class Discussion: If Plato's Syracuse hadn't been cut short by Dionysus of Sicily, could it have succeeded? What if Plato had not accepted the rule of Syracuse at all— would his philosophy have gained more traction, perhaps even had an influence on Aristocrates, undisputedly the greatest of the Greek philosophers? Why did Plato make poetry the focus of his first days in Syracuse? Is there something Homeric in the whimsy of the gods, and the war that eventually brought Syracuse to its knees? □