

INTRODUCTION

SOCRATIC IGNORANCE AND PLATONIC KNOWLEDGE

The *Apology* and *Parmenides* as Bookends of Socratic Wisdom

Socrates, son of Sophroniscus (*Euthyd.* 297e; *La.* 180d, *Hp. Mai.* 298b), born in 469 BCE in the deme of Alopece and executed in 399 by the Athenian democracy, wrote nothing in his lifetime. He was the consummate public intellectual, someone who denied he ever taught anyone in private.¹ He was a philosopher so popularized that even in his own day he gave rise to an entire genre of literary portraits, the *Sokratikoi logoi*.² Socrates's life, his death at the hands of his fellow citizens, his infamous disavowal of knowledge, his ironic dissimulation—all of these are so very well known, and the stuff of such common treatment, that they would certainly seem to rule Socrates out as an esoteric figure.³ And then we add the specific remarks that Socrates makes on the occasion of his trial—that he has no knowledge of virtue and that he is not a teacher at all. He consorted with public figures: politicians, tragedians, and shopkeepers, not to mention courtesans, generals, and especially Sophists, known for their retail merchandizing of public education. How could these associates be the audience for an esoteric teaching—if by esoteric we mean the inner arts, the ways of self-knowledge or of linking the divine in the human being to the divine principle, source of all?⁴ It would seem that no philosopher could be less eligible to be secreted away under the mantle of the Western esoteric tradition.⁵ Still, in this book I make just that claim: Socrates belongs to the Western esoteric tradition by virtue of his radical (yet admittedly public) declaration to the effect that he was aware of having no wisdom, great or small (*Pl., Ap.* 23a5). The present book may be defined as a careful elaboration of the implications of this statement, of what this Socratic awareness consists in, in light of the Socratic persona in Plato's dialogues.

As I detail in chapter 9, the *Parmenides* and the *Apology* delimit the trajectory of Socratic wisdom over the course of Socrates's life. In terms of the dialogues' dramatic chronology, we first meet Socrates in the *Parmenides* at

nineteen or twenty years old and at the very beginning of his philosophical life. He undergoes initiation into Eleatic philosophy under the tutelage of Parmenides and Zeno. The lessons young Socrates learns, particularly in the second half of the dialogue, where Parmenides elaborates his training in the dialectics of the one and many, allow Socrates an entryway into the first principle of (what would become) Platonic metaphysics, the One beyond being. The One of the *Parmenides*'s first hypothesis must be denied all predicates: past and future; place, time, and change; any characteristic or identity; and, above all, being itself. Here, in confronting the One that is not (*Prm.* 137b–142e),⁶ Socrates is introduced to the path of radical negation, the *via apophatica*, what the Vedanta calls *Nirguna Brahman* (god without attributes).⁷

Plato represents Socrates as undergoing this initiation into the One at the dramatic starting point of his dialogues. When in the *Apology* we meet Socrates at the age of seventy, he has fully developed and found a way to live in the wake, so to say, of this One; he understands the highest possible wisdom as the realization that he has no wisdom. That initial awakening to the ground of wisdom is something Socrates has lived with—we are meant to understand this within the dramatic development of the Socratic dialogues. Socrates's first glimpse, portrayed so vividly in the *Parmenides*, of the reality that is nowhere, no place, not this, not that, is both the starting point for Socrates's own journey, and the space within which the entire drama of the dialogues unfolds.

The *Parmenides* and the *Apology*, then, are bookends. The former marks the initiation of Socrates into the heart of wisdom and forms the dramatic incipit wherein his philosophical journey begins. The latter marks the completion of Socrates's life in wisdom as well as the dramatic date that signaled the approach of Socrates's death. Again, it is the *Apology* that proclaims Socratic wisdom, the wisdom that is no wisdom, as the highest wisdom. By inserting the philosophical trajectory of Socrates in between these two plateaus, or perhaps even nadirs of negativity, Plato reveals that Socratic wisdom is the not quite empty space that somehow contains Platonic knowledge, in other words, whatever else unfolds within the span of the dialogues.⁸ If Socratic wisdom is the highest wisdom, then all other forms of knowing, including the metaphysical theories that we understand under the banner of Platonism, are subsumed within it.

By associating this wisdom with Delphi, Plato also links Socratic wisdom to the precept *gnothi seauton* (know thyself) and in this way intimates from the very outset that Socratic wisdom is at its core derived from or identical to self-knowledge.⁹ The esoteric teaching of Socrates via the avenue of self-knowledge remains central and vital within Plato's overall corpus. All subsequent forms of philosophical discovery are permeated with the Socratic reminder that the true

ground of knowledge is just this highest wisdom that is without measure, that is to say, neither great nor small. Hence Socrates lingers in the dialogues, sometimes in the background, but always representing Plato's own self-interrogations. At the same time, this Socratic wisdom cannot be disclosed as a doctrine precisely because it is grounded in self-knowledge. In this sense, then, Socratic wisdom is esoteric: It is beyond any form or formulation, being in fact formless. It is the highest wisdom because, in the very words of Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, it consists in "assimilation to god, insofar as possible" (176b1), and so admits in a way of the possibility of divine knowledge, since, as Socrates says, "to become like god is to become just and pious, with wisdom" (176b1–2; Sedley 2004, 74).

For Plato, at least, Socrates embodies the highest human wisdom as he also attempts to allow others access to this wisdom, to assist them in their own development. For the would-be learner, this ripening is ideally a journey from being self-seeking and identified with or even exalting one's doxa, one's appearance or projection into the world, into being a seeker of truth, one who is willing to risk every doxa, a circumstance that the confrontation with Socrates actually facilitates.¹⁰ Intellectually, or spiritually, the evolution takes place as the person becomes aware of the primacy of his knowing, "epistemic" self over the objects of thought, the priority of the knowing self over the opinions harbored by this same self. As Socrates puts it in *Alcibiades I*, to care for the self is not the same as caring for what belongs to the self. What then is the self, apart from all of its accouterments? The true person, according to Socrates in *Alcibiades I*, the self itself, is the *ophthalmos* (132a5) or "pilot" of the soul (cf. *Phdr.* 247c–d): that is, the aspect of the soul that is the subject or seat of knowledge (*Alc.* 132c2) and as such is not identical with any of the things known. Moreover, not only is this the highest form of human wisdom, the realization that one has no wisdom, great or small. It is also divine knowledge, just because god is what one sees upon looking into the mirror of self: "[Is not the mind] therefore like the divine, and one who looks into the mind, on seeing the complete divine nature, that is, sees god and wisdom, would thus also know himself most?" (132c2–5).

Therefore, the Socratic conception of self-knowledge must be strictly qualified. We read in *Alcibiades I* that when looking into the mirror of the teacher's soul, the disciple sees his self, but also that god alone is in reality the only adequate mirror for the self. In other words, to know the self is to know the divine. Ibn Arabi, the famous thirteenth-century Sufi (and, some would say, Platonist philosopher),¹¹ wrote a book whose title was purportedly a hadith, or saying of the prophet Mohammed: "He who knows himself knows his lord."¹² This motto could do for a summary of esoteric wisdom. This wisdom then might be described from two points of view: on the one hand it is the self-realization of

the human being of her own reality that is not separate from the ultimate source of all reality. On the other hand, it is a realization that functions in tandem with the self-disclosure of the divine as not other than the very self who wakes up. This realization and this disclosure, and nothing less, form the basis, heart, and purpose of the esoteric tradition.¹³ And it is here that the exoteric tradition in the West has the nasty habit of silencing, censoring, imprisoning, and even executing those who have made their way to this experience and accepted the mission, as Socrates did, of disclosing the nature of their experience for the sake of ripening others. Socratic esotericism is no secret, then.¹⁴ To postulate this Socratic esotericism does not presuppose any undisclosed doctrines that were entrusted to an inner circle, for, even if there were such doctrines, the meaning of Socratic esotericism is not lost in the pages of an oral history that we can never reconstruct.¹⁵ On the contrary, the drama of the Socratic dialogues enacts with meticulous clarity the struggle of the human soul to listen to the highest wisdom, to cultivate self-knowledge, and to see through the externally derived false identity, the individual ego whose supreme end is limited merely to his or her own well-being. That this drama circulated freely and even became a popular form of literature in the fourth century suggests that what is esoteric about Socrates is nevertheless hidden in plain view. In sum, then, in stark contrast to the idea of secret teachings only intended for the few, Plato's Socratic persona circulates widely and openly; the streets of Athens, a public space, forms the setting for this figure, but he travels forward in time, into the minds of the everyday reader, taking subways, airplanes, and making Wi-Fi connections. Far from being a secret, Socrates has made his way through Christian, Jewish, and Muslim civilizations to modernity and postmodernity.¹⁶

On Not Being Deceived by Appearances

To place Socrates at the beginning of the Western esoteric tradition is already to commit an act of appropriation on the grandest scale; so much must be confessed. Those who like to read their texts in a more literal way—focusing on the bare-bones sketches afforded in the elenctic dialogues, where we find Socrates humbly discoursing in the streets of Athens, investigating human action, and pointedly denying having any wisdom—have every right and reason to be suspicious or even dismissive of this attempted appropriation. Such an objection must be faced seriously.

Plato's writings are filled with warnings to us: Don't be deceived by appearances. Nowhere is this caveat to be taken more seriously than in the appearance

of Socrates, who seems on the outside concerned with the affairs of this world, whose discourse is colored over by the pretensions and ambitions of his interlocutors, and who looks every bit the earthly philosopher that Cicero reports.¹⁷ Nowhere is this deception more apparent than at his trial, where we find the beleaguered Socrates assimilated to the ranks of sophists and physical reductionists, his enemies radical democrats who make him the scapegoat for the unavenged deaths of the loyalists to the constitution, and in the irony of the charges themselves: teaching foreign gods and corrupting the youth (ironic because Socrates's god lives within each and every one of the youths he purportedly corrupts). Socrates attracts the animus of a group who fundamentally misunderstand him and have no idea how radically his vision indicts the public institutions the Athenians have made responsible for their corporate soul-rearing. Socrates's intervention in the business as usual in Athens—by which I mean his interrogation of the reign of greed, of the philosophy of pleonexia, and of the intelligentsia who theorized human nature as precisely ungoverned and ungovernable by any law other than self-interest—was quite literally outrageous for institutions founded on this principle.

In the Western traditions we find the figure of the sage associated with the figure of the martyr. Later, especially Christian (Justin, *Apol. 5*; see Edwards 2007), writers understood Socrates as a martyr for truth, and it was his scandalous death at the hands of the democracy that catalyzed the explosion of literature meant to commemorate him. Especially in the French Enlightenment, the death of Socrates inspired literary imitations and artistic representations, as litterateurs belonging to the age of philosophes celebrated Socrates in the battle against censorship, even as the subject of Socrates's death became enormously popular in painting. Diderot, the beleaguered encyclopedist, translated Plato's *Apology* into French while imprisoned for his atheistic pamphlet, *Lettre sur les aveugles*. Voltaire invoked the name of Socrates in a letter to Diderot concerning the case of a young "blasphemer" (Jean Francois de la Barre) who was mutilated and beheaded and then burned on a funeral pyre along with a copy of Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique*, writing, "One simply has to write to Socrates [i.e., Diderot] when the Meletuses and Anytuses are soaked in blood and are lighting fires at the stake" (trans. Goulbourne [2007, 229–30]).

Silencing is a political technique and those who aspire to achieve their political ends by defrauding the world of its truth-tellers rarely understand what is genuinely at stake in the transgressions they seek to curb. Plato sets about correcting the record in his *Apology*, mentioning the Socratic daimonion, his divine sign, portraying Socrates as a soldier of Apollo, and, finally, investing Socrates with the unconditioned awareness that is the highest form of human wisdom.¹⁸

We could compare Suhrawardi, the twelfth-century founder of the Ishraqi school who understood himself to be a proponent of Platonic *Dawḳ*, intuitive knowledge, martyred at the age of 38 (Walbridge 2000). We could compare al-Hallaj, who was martyred for saying “I am the Truth” (Massignon 1994). Or we could compare countless other sages whose silences happened to postdate their deaths: Origen, who had anathemas pronounced against him for teaching that all souls are equal to the soul of Christ; or Meister Eckhart, who like Socrates defended himself against heresy in public, February 13, 1327, but died before he could answer the papal commission (Senner 2012).

But what is most remarkable about Socrates is not his death; rather, Socrates’s life is the more remarkable, exemplary for his humble service to the people of Athens, drafting them into the exalted life of philosophy, turning his hometown into a city of sages. We ought not to be fooled by appearances into thinking that Socrates was engaged in idle chatter, that, lacking the confidence to affirm he knew anything, he prodded his fellow citizens into discontent and reflection about the humdrum business of how to get ahead in this world. Socrates encountered people precisely as they went about their daily affairs; but a face-to-face encounter with Socrates was always and everywhere a face-to-face encounter with oneself.

In Plato’s dialogues, we meet with a side of Socrates’s life and personality that perhaps anticipates a form of Platonist hagiography, in which philosophy is represented as an initiatory tradition. Although there are affinities between the Socratic teaching of a true, impersonal self and the later, Stoic idea of the purely rational self that is the *apospasma*, or fragment of cosmic reason, Plato points the reader backwards, framing the Socratic quest for self in the light of religious, particularly Pythagorean, teaching that stressed the affinity of the self and the divine. Plato emphasizes the religious aspects of Socratic teaching by narrating Socrates’s relationship with Apollonian wisdom, by marking the place of dream, oracle, and vision in the formation of Socrates’s philosophical career, and by associating Socrates with initiatory traditions (as, for example, his acquaintance with a doctor of Zalmoxis in the *Charmides* [156d–e]).¹⁹ How are we to account for these affinities with sources of wisdom that perhaps do not arise from the rational or discursive formulations commonly thought to comprise the whole of Socratic method?

Socrates even looks a little more than human in the portraits that Plato draws. Later philosophers in the Platonist tradition tried, on the basis of the division of souls that Plato makes at *Phaedrus* 248c, to create a theoretical space for the idea of the superior soul, one that is precisely not concerned with his own well-being. In his *De anima*, Iamblichus distinguishes between the purposes for

which each class of soul (as signified in the *Phaedrus's* birth order) undertake an embodied life:

Furthermore, I actually think that the purposes for which souls descend are different and that they thereby also cause differences in the manner of the descent. For the soul that descends for the salvation, purification, and perfection of this realm is immaculate in its descent. The soul, on the other hand, that directs itself about bodies for the exercise and correction of its own character is not entirely free of passions and was not sent away free in itself. The soul that comes down here for punishment and judgment seems somehow to be dragged and forced. (sec. 29; Finamore and Dillon, 57)

In fact, the fifth-century Neoplatonic commentator Hermias interprets the figure of Socrates in the *Phaedrus* as just such a higher soul, an avatar, sent to human beings to turn their souls toward philosophy. Hermias writes that Socrates “was sent down into coming-to-be for the sake of benefitting the human race and especially the souls of the youth” (Hermias 1.2; Ὁ Σωκράτης ἐπὶ εὐεργεσίᾳ τοῦ τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένους καὶ τῶν ψυχῶν τῶν νέων κατεπέμφθη εἰς γένεσιν). In speaking of Socrates’s descent into the world of becoming, Hermias is obviously alluding to Socrates’s own self-description in the *Apology*, where he says that “I believe the god has attached me to the city, since I am such as to wake you up” (30e6).

Socrates and Initiatory Traditions

Socrates’s life (a life that gave rise to a new genre of literature, the *Sokratikos logos*) is replete with exemplary force. But he also accomplishes the task of initiating those with whom he converses into the life of philosophy. Plato dramatizes this initiatory duty as the rude awakening, the intense and sudden interruption of business as usual, in the word trade with Socrates; he uses the language of initiatory ritual to punctuate Socrates’s role as guide in the journey that is philosophy. Plato narrates and at times mythologizes the journey from ignorance and desire to wisdom and beneficence as the journey out of the cave, the hyperouranian flight, the emergence upon the true surface of the earth. Initially, that is, in the Socratic dialogues and according to the best lights of the interlocutors, virtue appears in its outermost manifestation as a kind of behavior, or even a discreet moment of action. Yet later, as the philosophical journey continues, virtue reveals itself as a form, a facet of wisdom, even, a name for the divine. The contemplation

of the form at the lower level begins with the qualities or virtues that make us human. Yet these same qualities, virtue, wisdom, beauty, justice, also show up in the *hyperouranian topos*, for example, or at the summit of the ascent to beauty or the good, in their more divine, eternal manifestations. Plato depicts this transition from an outward orientation or conventional understanding of a virtue, or, indeed, of a vice, to a nonvulgar or philosophical understanding of the same phenomenon in the terms of initiation. Describing the setting of the dialogue in the idyllic setting on the banks of the Illissos, Hermias suggests that an initiation is about to take place:

His going barefoot denotes [Socrates's] easily cleansed and simple nature as well as his fitness to assist in the elevation [of souls], qualities that always belong to Socrates, but belong to Phaedrus at that time in particular, owing to the fact that Socrates was getting ready to initiate him.

Τὸ δὲ ἀνυπόδητος τὸ εὐλυτον καὶ ἀπέριττον σημαίνει καὶ τὸ πρὸς ἀναγωγὴν ἐπιτήδειον, ὅπερ Σωκράτει μὲν αἰεὶ ὑπῆρχε, τῷ Φαίδρῳ δὲ τότε διὰ τὸ μέλλειν ὑπὸ Σωκράτους τελειοῦσθαι. (Hermias I.29.24)

Contemplation, framed as the initiation of the soul into a sacred wisdom tradition, is a prevailing theme in the *Phaedrus*:

Then we were all initiated into that mystery which is rightly accounted blessed beyond all others; whole and unblemished were we that did celebrate it, untouched by the evils that waited us in days to come; whole and unblemished likewise, free from all alloy, steadfast and blissful were the spectacles on which we gazed in the moment of final revelation. (250b8–5; trans. Hackforth [Plato 1952, 93]).

From the *Charmides*, we learn that Socrates met a doctor from Thrace while he was stationed at Potidaea. This shaman taught Socrates an incantation along with a cure for headache, stipulating that the person to be healed must agree to submit his entire self, body and soul, to the Thracian rites. However, these rites are not likely to be very pleasant. The doctors of Zalmoxis, Socrates reports, “are said to immortalize” (156d5). In the *Charmides*, Socrates remains coy about the nature of these ceremonies, but in Herodotus we read that every five years the Getae send a messenger to Zalmoxis by impaling the messenger on javelins:

Once every five years they choose one of their people by lot and send him as a messenger to Salmoxis, with instructions to report their

needs; and this is how they send him: three lances are held by designated men; others seize the messenger to Salmoxis by his hands and feet, and swing and toss him up on to the spear-points. (Hdt. 4.94.2)

It is hard to understand what Socrates means when he says he met this mysterious physician, the disciple of Zalmoxis. As has been pointed out, Socrates himself functions like Zalmoxis in returning from the field of the dead with his message of divine wisdom. One additional clue is found in Herodotus, who informs us that “Salmoxis was a man who was once a slave in Samos, his master being Pythagoras son of Mnesarchus” (4.95.1). Thus, the doctor himself was initiated by Zalmoxis, who was in turn a disciple of Pythagoras. According to Plato, then, Socrates learned how to heal his students within a line of teachers that can be traced back to Pythagoras.

Why does Plato invent this mysterious lineage for Socrates? Recent work has done much to uncover Plato’s own appropriation of Orphic and Pythagorean teachings, and Kingsley (1995) has devoted an important book to establishing this connection through a close reading of the mythic passages in Plato’s *Phaedo* and *Gorgias*. The discovery of the Derveni papyrus has confirmed scholarly conjecture about the Orphic setting or tone of the myths in both these dialogues, since this papyrus “consists of the allegorical interpretation of a poem ascribed to Orpheus” (Kingsley 1995, 116).²⁰ But what this quotation from the *Charmides* suggests is that Plato himself is the initiator of the tradition that associates Socratic philosophy and the traditions of Orphism and Pythagoreanism, precisely by hinting about this Thracian lineage of Socrates’s teacher. Burkert (1972) long ago came to the conclusion that “Plato’s disciples join him in taking their place within the Pythagorean tradition. . . . Plato’s school sees in its own philosophical treatment of the problem of ultimate principles a continuation of Pythagoreanism. . . . This Platonic interpretation of Pythagorean philosophy became dominant in the ancient tradition. Aristotle was the only one to contradict it, and show us thereby what had been there before Plato; and in fact what Plato presupposes is what Aristotle criticizes” (91–92).

Sometimes Socrates is accompanied by a dream consort, one who guides him in between worlds. Such is the anonymous white-garbed lady who calls Socrates from the prison cell in Athens: “I dreamed that a beautiful, fair woman clothed in white raiment came to me and called me,” he says (Pl., *Cri.* 44a). Another such consort is Diotima. The *Symposium* is the site of one of Socrates’s most important dreams. Here the “action” takes place after Socrates has fallen into a dream or trance state: “Socrates was left behind along the way, when he entered into a concentration on himself” (174d5). Like the *Protagoras* and

Republic, the *Symposium* is staged as a *nekuia*—a mytheme involving a visit to the abode of death for the purpose of consultation. In this tale Socrates himself plays the role of Orpheus (note the references to Socrates’s enchanting music at 215c5), who enters into a kind of underworld for the purpose of rescuing his beloved (Alcibiades) but notably fails in his mission. Phaedrus refers to the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice in the middle of his speech (179d2), casting Orpheus in a negative light, as someone who failed in his mission because he was unwilling to die on behalf of his beloved. Alcibiades takes on the role of Eurydice when he refers to his painful wound as more fierce than a snakebite (218a5). These scattered Orphic references take us to the ritual level of the myth, with its initiatory associations.

The central Orphic myth narrates a cosmogony in which the androgynous being Phanes springs from a cosmic egg and gives birth to the world through a miraculous act of autoprocreation, whereupon Zeus promptly swallows the creation. It also includes a sequence in which the Titans consume the infant Dionysus (later repaired by Apollo) and then pay dearly for their crime with a blast of Zeus’s thunderbolt. Their blood falls to the earth and spawns the human race. In all likelihood, this myth implied the ritual death, dismemberment, and reconstitution of the initiate, hence its association with initiatory ritual.

In the *Symposium* (189ff.), we are told that originally the human race consisted of three sexes, male (descended from the sun), female (descended from the earth), and the androgen (descended from the sun). These originary beings conspired to inveigh against heaven with their might and Zeus in punishment, divided them like eggs. After Apollo healed the scars of these half-people, they were condemned to a lonely search for their other half. In Plato’s version, the ancestors of the human race must represent all the players of the original Orphic cycle: the egg itself (note the comparison to eggs at *Symp.*190c), the god Phanes (at least, the androgen resembles the bisexual Phanes; and note that the name Aristophanes contains the word Phanes), the Titans (they scale heaven and are punished for it), Dionysus (they are dismembered and then healed by Apollo), and, finally, the living members of the human race. The roles assigned to Zeus as divine nemesis for the hubris of an original race, to Apollo as restorer of the human species, and to a kinder, gentler, postlapsarian humanity, in Plato’s myth, seem closely modeled on the Protogonos narrative, the Orphic theology described in the Derveni papyrus. Plato’s Aristophanic parody invokes the Orphic cosmogony.²¹

Alcibiades is one initiatory candidate in our dialogue, and he complains bitterly of the voice of the demoi that, siren-like, calls him away from the vocation of philosophy.²² Conspicuously wearing an initiate’s crown, he recounts

his spiritual death at the hands of Socrates using language borrowed from the mysteries (μανίας τε καὶ βακχείας; “madness and [Bacchic] frenzy”; *Symp.* 218b4). By quoting the Orphic proem just before he describes the cloaking scene, Alcibiades intimates that an initiation took place. Here, for the first and evidently last time, he experienced a loss of self. At that moment, Alcibiades tells us, Socrates’s persona was cleft and the brilliance of his virtue shone forth.

Notwithstanding the external, historical reasons for linking Alcibiades to initiation rites, I think it important to emphasize the ritual associations of the *stephanos*, or crown of garlands, which marks Alcibiades as the candidate for initiation. The symbolic role of the *stephanos* is complicated by its diverse usage outside of the mainstream celebratory occasions of victory festivals, which is of course the obvious explanation for Alcibiades’s crown in the *Symposium*. Initiatory expectations are fulfilled as we encounter the ritual dismemberment often associated with Shamanic religion. As Eliade explains, the Shaman undergoes a complete dismantling of the physical body, often at the hands of a goddess who will at once remove his human identity and invest him with a visionary or spiritual function. Eliade quotes a recounting of a Tibetan Bon ritual that relates to the spiritual dismemberment of the one who seeks such a vision:

To the sound of the drum made of human skulls and of the thighbone trumpet, the dance is begun and the spirits are invited to come and feast. The power of meditation evokes a goddess brandishing a naked sword; she springs at the head of the sacrificer, decapitates him, and hacks him to pieces; then the demons and wild beasts rush on the still quivering fragments, eat the flesh and drink the blood. (Robert Bleichsteiner, as quoted in Eliade 1964, 470)

Enter Diotima, who, in her dissection of self-identity (*Symp.* 208), accomplishes her first task as mystagogue, namely, to destroy the initiand’s old self. No one can survive Diotima’s scrutiny: mind and body arise together as mutually conditioned constructions. Self-identity ebbs away in the flow of memory while consciousness disappears without a trace of its previous contents. Disclosing this radical dissociation from a stable selfhood is what Diotima aims at in her dialectical antidote to the delusions generated in conventional discourse.

After Socrates’s identity is shattered and there is no trace of self left, Diotima reveals the dream ladder to him, and Socrates becomes the shamanistic counterpart to Diotima. He now is given access to worlds that hitherto were closed to him. The dream ladder leads the Shaman out of his *pholos*, his lair; by means of an ethereal body, he is able to track the presence of a herd, and thus recover *trophē*, the wherewithal to nourish the other members of his tribe.

After showing him the ladder of love, Diotima teaches Socrates the art of *theoria*; she teaches him to track the divine herd, the eternal kine, that is, the forms. Thus Socrates is also the mystic initiate of Diotima, priestess of the Eleusinian mysteries. (Recall that Alcibiades himself was accused of profaning these same mysteries). Diotima uses initiatory language: “Even you, Socrates, could probably be initiated into these rites of love. But as for the purpose of these rites when they are done correctly, that is the final and highest mystery and I don’t know if you are capable of it” (210a; trans. Nehamas and Woodruff [Plato 1997e, 493]).²³

Among the nomadic peoples of the North, the Shaman is said by means of a dream to be able to see the herd grazing at a great distance from the tribe of hunters. Orphic lore, too, is associated with Thrace, since Orpheus originally came from Thrace. While on campaign in Potidaia, near Thrace, Socrates practiced entering into deep trance states (*Symp.* 220c7). Plato describes this state as “concentration on himself,” when Socrates falls behind at the party.²⁴ Near Thrace, too, we see Socrates inhabiting an ethereal or dream body, as he is able to traverse ice with his bare feet, among other signs. After Alcibiades’s attempt to seduce Socrates, from Alcibiades’s narrative summation, we learn what happened in Thrace:

All this had already occurred when Athens invaded Potidaea [a city in Thrace allied to Athens] where we served together and shared the same mess. . . . Socrates went out in [wintry weather] and even in bare feet he made better progress on the ice than the other soldiers did in their boots. (219e7)

I suspect that Socrates, when he learned the spell from the “doctor of Zalmoxis,” did not after all meet a human teacher, but that he is alluding to another sort of helper, perhaps encountered during one of those visions Plato describes in the *Symposium*.

So far we have seen that Socratic wisdom is associated with initiatory traditions: in the *Charmides*, Socrates meets a mysterious doctor of Zalmoxis who teaches him a method of healing; in the *Symposium*, Socrates falls into trances, descends into the netherworld, inhabits an ethereal body in which he performs superhuman feats, meets a dream consort who shows him a ladder to a heavenly realm, and, finally, initiates Alcibiades into the sacred tradition of philosophy, infusing the venom of self-awareness into Alcibiades’s life, but not quite killing him off.²⁵ In the *Euthydemus*, Socrates alludes to the nomads who practice a form of dismemberment, gilding the skull of their victim and flaying the flesh—all magical acts that recall the motif of *sparagmos*, of initiation, of destroying the self; in the *Phaedo*, Socrates, accompanied by the youth of Athens, finds his way into

the labyrinth, there to confront death itself. We can add to this catalogue other details, such as the place of dream and vision in his philosophical career, the offering to Asclepius at the end of his life, the function of the oracle in launching his philosophical practice, as well as his associations with Artemis. This placing of Socrates in the shroud of mystery religions, of traditional Athenian religion, including the Eleusinian Mysteries, and of exotic religions that may or may not have been incorporated into Hellenic traditions—all of this is something that has generally been relegated to the end of the Platonist tradition. What purpose does its appearance have here, at the very beginning of what we may now think of as Platonism?

It is the thesis of this book that Plato marks Socrates as the initiator of an esoteric tradition, suggesting that Socratic wisdom is the larger vision within which Platonic knowledge, via the study of metaphysical and ethical doctrines, develops. From the silence of Socratic wisdom, Plato articulates the written, rationally developed philosophy that spawns the tradition of Platonism. Yet, at the same time, interwoven into the fabric of Plato's text is the space of Socrates, ever breathing the life of wisdom into the program of philosophical formulations. Always the Socratic silence punctuates the Platonic word; always the Socratic mirror shines back to remind the reader to take up this text in the spirit of self-inquiry. Therefore, the Socratic intervention still interrupts the interlocutor, acts upon the psyche of the interlocutor, in this case, Plato's reader, who desires the good. He aspires to the good precisely because he lacks the good; what he sees in Socrates is the paradigm of the philosopher. Socrates, if he is to benefit the interlocutor, cannot bestow knowledge or even act on the interlocutor. He can only help to reveal the true nature of the interlocutor; the self itself, the knower, free from and not dependent on any of the conditions known for his ultimate felicity. This is the person to whom Socrates addresses his words, the "beautiful boy" of the erotic dialogues.

Socratic aporia, the vivid experience of somehow, however dimly, knowing, yet failing to define, the virtue, an experience that shines a spotlight on the subject engaged in the inquiry, leads the interlocutor in an interior direction, pointing him toward the very light of knowledge, reorienting him. This moment of turning around and asking the question, "By what means do I know anything at all? What is knowledge?" is mapped onto the journey as epistrophe, the prisoner's detachment from the shadows and his discovery of their source. What is knowledge? How do we know that we know? In the *Theaetetus*, which constitutes a reprise of Socratic philosophy, Plato describes the entire Socratic enterprise as spiritual midwifery, of helping others to bring forth the vision of the soul, showing the primacy of the knower. In the *Republic*, the truer self is represented

by the sea-god Glaucus, once his outer shell has been removed; Plato speaks in this dialogue of the “man within the man,” the inner man. Likewise, Socrates’s message to his interlocutor is literally, “shed your skin”; in other words, let your soul appear, and behold yourself in the mirror of wisdom. Plato uses a plethora of literary devices to convey the moment of epistrophe, retreating from identity with doxa, what we might call the “visible self,” the all-too-common, assumed self and its desires, and finding the genuine person: the Socratic doppelgänger of *Hippias Minor*, the flaying of the skin in the *Euthydemus*, the drinking of hemlock of the *Phaedo* and being released from prison.

We must be careful, then, not to mistake what is only the Socratic persona, literally, the mask of Socrates, for the Socratic self. We can remain open to the always surprising fact that a conversation with Socrates, than which nothing, on the surface, appears more ordinary, gives rise to a revolution in self-identity. The message of Socrates, conveyed in such an ordinary way by such an ordinary fellow is to care for one’s soul. But that commitment involves an astonishing journey, as we’ll see, past all of the conventions that themselves masquerade as virtues, into the heart of virtue, the adornments of wisdom that in their highest manifestations are none other than the names of the divine.