Reading Plato's *Republic*

by Robert Richardson

My talk has a 'prequel' so let me begin with it. Reading and re-reading the *Republic* over the years I have come to a sense of what the book is about that is not the usual one. It is most often taken to be Plato's plan for an ideal polity, one that he would like to see actualized, a city he would build if he could. This is the view of the work expounded by many renowned commentators and the one that comes out most often in our discussions of it in the seminar. It is against such a view that I wish to defend it. This may seem strange since I am not a Platonist, whatever that might be, and I disagree with many of the work's deepest assumptions. Even so, I don't have to look far to see why I have made myself a sort of guardian of it. Socrates is one of my heroes. There are few enough of them and he is one of the ones I most want to keep. Whenever my regard for him falters, as it sometimes does, I only have to re-read the *Apology* and I am gone on him again. If, as is sometimes claimed, he authorizes the telling of lies, advocates censorship of the arts, and endorses repressive regimes, then he is not someone I care to emulate. But I think such charges are unjust and when I hear them my impulse is to rush to his defense.

This makes for trouble in the seminar. The more fully I have worked out my own view of the *Republic* over the years the more I have felt pressed to work it into the conversation and the more deeply I have confronted the tutor's dilemma. After reading a book many times and thinking about it again and again, it is almost impossible not to develop some other and presumably deeper understanding of it than is likely to emerge in

a seminar where most are encountering it for the first time. Whether and how and when the tutor's uncommon understanding should enter the conversation becomes a pressing issue. It might inform the discussion, centering it and deepening it; it might as easily unsettle and even throttle it, leaving no one ready to speak out of the depths of the general ruin but the enlightened tutor, telling it all, now that the hour—or two—is at hand. Thus, the tutor's dilemma may sometimes reveal the characteristic symptom of the tutor's disease, an ailment which might be called the talking pox, a feverish need to talk *all* the time. It is an ill to which I am particularly susceptible and I find my resistance weakens as my estimate of my own thinking grows more inflated year by year. If rumor can be trusted, I am not alone in this, but that is another story—many another story perhaps—and I am only here to tell my own.

As a restorative, and possibly even a cure, it occurred to me that it might relieve the pressure of my need to speak if I put my views on paper. By developing them as amply and explicitly as I could and inviting a public audit, I might purge the fitful fever and avoid exposing future seminar participants to my condition. And because it was a significant feature of my account that the *Republic* should be read as a dramatic dialogue and a work of the imagination, I thought I should embody my thoughts about it in a similar form. I also wanted to speak of it in a young man's voice. The result was a story called "The Defense." In it a doctoral candidate writes a dissertation on the *Republic* and is then examined on it by a committee of graduate school professors.

When it was done I wanted to make it known, so I showed it to Mr. Davis to see if I might read it on an occasion such as this. He said he liked it, and he appreciated my effort to make a drama of it, but it was too long to read in an hour and it included a lot of

details that were incidental to the expression of my views. It might be better, he thought, to simply break the main points out and deliver them as a conventional lecture. Would I be willing to do that? I said I would and here I am.

But as soon as I sat down to turn my little drama into a text for this talk, I regretted my decision. I had to reckon with a fact which I had been able to keep pretty much out of sight until then. It was not only artistic aspiration and a wish to emulate the original that had entered into my decision to write a dialogue. The dialogue form gave me so much latitude and allowed me to avoid so much trouble: I could let its characters skip here and there with their questions, allow for the responses to be broken off as I chose and stick to the places in the text that served my purpose while avoiding those that might prove troublesome. All the while the fictional stance allowed me to leave it uncertain whether any or all or none of the characters spoke for me. In short I could remain out of sight in my fictional dialogue in a way that I can't do here. Alas.

But I said I would do this and now I can only make the best of it. I mention all this by way of warning. One of the seminar partners who has had to endure my paroxysms and pontifications more than once while we were reading the *Republic* together has taken to calling me Wild Bob. You may soon see why. In both style and substance I'm going to stick, as much as I can, with what brought me here. It is too late now to be circumspect and careful. I can't go through the work line by line, making sure everything fits, arguing out every issue, and acknowledging the debts I owe to many others—some of you sitting in this room in fact—who have helped inform my views.

But, ready or not, I had better get at it, lest you think I am Nestor, come back to speak, or even worse, Narcissus—although here I must admit, and will not blush to say,

that it was only when I began to look as deeply as I could into myself that I began to imagine I could see what the work of the *Republic* was, and what it asked of me.

Since this is going to be as reckless as my fictional account ever was, I'll choose the same starting point for it. In my story as originally written, its protagonist, Ned Sutherland is the narrator, but I will take over that function in what ensues. As the story opens he goes to the office of the professor he hopes will supervise his doctoral dissertation, hands him a copy of his proposal and waits while he reads it. Ned knows the claims he makes will seem extravagant and fears that his proposal will not be accepted. In fact that is what happens and before he can proceed he has to tone it down, lower his aims and reduce its scope until the dissertation he finally completes is but a shadow of the one he wanted to write in the beginning. This is his original proposal:

> If all the essays, articles, books and lectures treating the *Republic* as Plato's conception of an ideal polity were rolled into a ball and hurled into orbit they would outshine the moon, yet fail to truly illuminate the text. In their bleak and dreary light the work's central theme can scarcely be discerned, its artful complexity appreciated, or its purpose understood.
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> The city in speech imagined by the participants in the discussion is not a place where anyone, especially its creators, would choose to dwell. It is the work, as Socrates puts it, of men telling tales in a tale, a kind of play within a play. Reading the *Republic*, which we might think of anachronistically as Plato's *Divine Comedy,* is more like reading Dante or Shakespeare than reading Aristotle.
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> The *Republic* is a work of the imagination, a poetic creation, a comic drama. That it has serious, and seriously intended, philosophic import is surely the case but it contains little that could pass for rigorous logical argument; it rationally demonstrates no truths; and it does not yield a design for a city where actual humans might reside. What it does is offer us a vision of the philosophic life and a dramatic enactment of it. The Good itself, which is the end and aim of the philosophic vision—and, this play suggests, the end and aim of all life—is never shown or seen. There is a story told of what it might be like and what the consequences of seeing it might be, but the Good never appears—or rather it only appears. Its

> reality is posited, the desire to see it is aroused, its significance is portrayed, but only its image is revealed. One of the central paradoxes of the work lies in this fact. The Good is available to human inquiry and insight only as appearance, image, imitation. All that is true can be seen only in its light, but it can never be truly seen as it is in itself. How then are we to decide between better and worse when the standard of judgment is beyond our actual sight? That is the dramatic dilemma of the dialogue and it is only resolved, if it is resolved at all, at the level of imagination. Meanwhile, we as readers, along with the characters in the drama, are intended to be smitten by the Good and especially by Socrates, the highest human embodiment, image or imitation of it.
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> I propose to examine what I consider to be the central issue in the *Republic*, the informing of desire by intelligence and imagination, and to show the manifold ways in which Plato's notion of imitation is crucial to his exploration of this theme. The dramatic structure, the episodes, the characters and their interactions in this deeply self-reflexive dialogue, far from being mere literary devices, are integral to Plato's purpose. To overlook them, as so many interpreters have done, is to miss the meaning of the work and misconstrue its message. To see the *Republic* in its proper light we must welcome the fabulist, parodist, punster, ironist and master of imitation that Plato surely is into our own imaginations and let him set them at play.

So there you have it. I think you can see why, even in a work of fiction, this could never be accepted as a dissertation proposal. It does, however, express in one blast most of what I want to say. But I won't just dump it on you and run away like a bathman as Socrates accuses Thrasymachus of trying to do after he pours a great shower of speech all at once into everyone's ears. I will stay to give a fuller account and even remain for questions, but I will let this effusion stand as the pattern for what follows and skip to the fictional examination I contrived for Ned's eventual dissertation defense.

Most of the exchanges in it take place between Ned and each of three other characters in turn: Reginald Belnap, Brad Ripley, and Marston Dupree. Belnap is a substitute, sitting in for another faculty member who was injured in an auto accident a

few days earlier. Ripley is a young political philosopher who defies the sartorial conventions—a coat and tie—that were still observed on such occasions in the late 1960's when the story is set, and shows up attired in a T-shirt and bell bottoms, sporting granny glasses and long hair. Dupree, is a recently minted Ph.D., newly elevated to faculty status, but for several years a graduate student along with Ned. They have attended numerous classes together, have differed sharply on many occasions, and are not friends.

In order to keep my talk in touch with both its playful and polemical roots I have retained these characters and some of their questions along with Ned's responses. There is a danger that you, fastened in your seats for the hour, with only your ears to aid you and unable to see the text in which the shadows of these characters pass, may have some trouble keeping track of who it is that is speaking at any given moment. To lessen this danger, I have eliminated some of the back and forth between the other participants and Ned, and strung together into longer speeches several of Ned's replies. Beyond this I will do what I can with my tone of voice to indicate a change in speakers.

To begin the examination the chairman of the committee in my story turns to Belnap, the last minute substitute, and asks him if he would like to get things started. Belnap is taken aback by this. He has barely had time to read the dissertation, and he never intended to do anything but get through the hour as inconspicuously as possible. It takes him a long moment to think of anything to say, but he finally comes up with a question.

"I sometimes wonder what Book One of the *Republic* has to do with the rest of it. I've even read somewhere, I think, that there are scholars who believe it might have been

written long before as something complete in itself and then pasted on to the beginning of the dialogue later, without there being any real connection at all. Do you have any thoughts about that?"

Ned is almost as surprised by the question as Belnap was at having to ask it. It doesn't seem to connect in any way with the dissertation he has actually written, although it is relevant to the one he originally imagined he might write. But he doesn't mind; he would just as soon talk about the thesis he didn't write as the one he did, and as it turns out that is how most of their next hour is spent.

"I don't know why anyone would think it wasn't connected," Ned answers. "In fact, I think you could make a case that everything else in the dialogue is prefigured there and flows from it. It is full of intimations, suggestions, questions, issues, that come up again in the later books. I suppose you could take the way it opens as a device for gluing together parts that were once disparate. "I went down to the Piraeus yesterday, with Glaucon, son of Ariston," Socrates says and then goes on to narrate the whole thing for an unseen audience. Maybe it seems a little odd for Plato to begin like this, and it might be worth wondering why the work is recollected instead being conveyed in a more straightforward way, but I don't think it helps to try to explain the opening sentence by inventing a need for it that doesn't exist. There is no disjunction between Book One and what follows.

"Think about that first sentence: I went *down* to the Piraeus. Down is a word that is full of associations that resonate through the whole work. It reminds us of heroic journeys to the underworld made by Heracles, Odysseus and Theseus. It prefigures the allegory of the cave in Book Seven. It is certainly no accident that the dialogue takes

place *down* there. The Piraeus is the port area outside the city of Athens proper. It is the very citadel of desire. Down there the ships come to dock that bring Athenians whatever they need or think they might want; there the sailors that man these ships come ashore to satisfy their own desires. It is where all the dives and dens and brothels are. And it is desire, the desire to take in a festival, to see the sights, that takes Socrates and Glaucon down there.

"And the first thing that happens after they have satisfied their wish to look is their mock arrest by Polemarchus and his friends, a little moment of drama that recalls Socrates' real arrest and trial and gives us a clue that the *Republic* will be his true defense. They head off together to a household that belongs to Cephalus, the father of Polemarchus, where they come to roost for the night. The conversation there between Socrates and Cephalus that gets things going brings up the issue of desire and its proper place in a man's life right away. Cephalus notes that his friend Sophocles lauds old age for weakening a man's interest in bodily pleasures and freeing him from many mad monsters; and before he quits the scene he offers a preliminary notion of justice: one man giving back what has been taken from another. When Polemarchus takes his place in the conversation this formulation is soon amended and justice is said to be giving to each what is owed; then after some close questioning by Socrates it is amended again. Justice is said to be helping friends and doing harm to enemies. This must have been a commonplace view of it at the time since similar statements of it occur in Thucydides' *History* and Sophocles' *Antigone*. Socrates takes issue with this and in the exchange that follows he gets Polemarchus to agree that a just man never does harm to anyone. This

happens pretty quickly and it is not clear how many in the company are persuaded by it, but one of them isn't, for sure.

"Thrasymachus, thinking Polemarchus has given in much too easily, jumps into the fray like a wild beast, intending to rip the argument apart. This initiates an encounter with Socrates in which a lot of questions are raised that will be taken up again later as the discussion continues into the night: whether a ruler rules for his own sake or for the sake of the ruled; what benefits each might receive; whether the ruler requires knowledge and of what sort it might be; and what is the best and most desirable life for a man to live. The immediate point of contention is the nature of justice, but what really matters about this confrontation is not that it produces some new and better formulation of what is just; what matters is that in this dramatic encounter justice is enacted.

"An issue that has been in play almost from the first is who is to be in command of the evening's adventure and what rules are going to govern it. Socrates, taken prisoner in a jesting moment by Polemarchus and the others, is told that he must go with them and can't escape unless he proves stronger. The possibility that he might persuade them to let him go is jokingly denied, so he is obliged to go along with them. Later, when Cephalus puts in an appearance, it might seem that he, as the oldest man present and the company's host, should rule the feast of talk the evening is soon to become, but he is more interested in sacrificing to the gods than in joining the party, so he cedes his place to his son and heir, the same man who led the press gang that snared Socrates earlier. In the exchange that follows, Polemarchus is persuaded to become the friend and guardian of Socrates' argument. So in this bit of by-play the momentary prisoner has convinced the chief of his captors to free him after all. Not only that, he now appears to be in charge.

"This is more than Thrasymachus can take. He wants to be the boss. He is a rhetorician, a man who knows how to dominate a crowd and win applause by making powerful speeches. He wants to defeat Socrates and his arguments while everyone is watching, and be acknowledged as the victor. He assaults Socrates in speech, spouting abuse and insult, sneering at him for being a high-minded innocent, altogether too much of a baby to see how the world really works, then in the next moment denouncing him as a crafty prosecutor, out to twist arguments, put words in his opponents' mouths and show them up in any way he can, always knowing more than he pretends to know, and using his celebrated irony as a weapon.

"What is being contested in this trial of strength is Thrasymachus' claim that justice is the advantage of the stronger. In the heat of the argument he carries this view to its limit and asserts that the life of the perfectly unjust man is strongest and best. He extols the life of the tyrant as its fulfillment on a grand scale. He accuses Socrates of agreeing with him secretly, and of wanting to play the tyrant himself since he manifestly intends to establish his style of discourse as superior and dominate the audience with it. To this he adds the charge that Socrates intends to do him harm but is trying to conceal it from the others.

"So as Thrasymachus sees it, the issue can be settled very simply: if he achieves victory, no matter how he does it, he proves himself the stronger and that makes him a just man by his own definition.

"For Socrates the issue is not so simple and this is more than a mere trial of strength. In order to prevail he must get Thrasymachus to see that justice is something other than the advantage of the stronger. So he can't win the argument simply by being

clever, showing up his opponent, and proving himself to be the better speaker. That might prove him just by Thrasymachus' measure, if Thrasymachus really means it, but it would prove nothing else. He must achieve something more substantive, and he has to be careful how he goes about it. Since Thasymachus is taking the part of the unjust man, he is free to play that role in the argument, which in fact he does by making unjust accusations and attempting to tyrannize with his speeches. But this course is not open to Socrates. He must proceed in a way that is manifestly just, even though no general agreement has yet been reached as to what justice is. What's more, he and Polemarchus have agreed only moments before that a just man never does harm to anyone. So he must get the better of Thrasymachus without doing him harm.

"As spectators watching this drama unfold, we see that Thrasymachus is bullying and unjust and deserves to be put in his place, as the audience on the scene undoubtedly sees also. But that is not what is important. Thrasymachus himself must come to see it. And this, after a great deal of sweat, is what he winds up doing.

"He finally has to agree with Socrates that during their exchange the just man has been revealed as good and wise, and the unjust man as ignorant and bad. It is not these words themselves that are so important, although they are about as far as they can be from his original assertions and he has a great deal of trouble uttering them. Nor is it the particular steps in the argument that force him into this acknowledgment that make this episode so revealing. It is the fact of their agreement itself and what it means.

"At one point in the proceedings Socrates points out that they could keep alternating speeches and their contest could go on a long time, until finally some sort of external judges would have to be called upon to decide the outcome. As an alternative he

suggests that they should see if they can come to agreement, and if they do, to let that be decisive. That way each of them will be both pleaders and judges of the case and they will decide the outcome. Thrasymachus accepts this proposal, without seeing that he has agreed to reset the terms in which their battle is being waged. So when he finds himself agreeing with something he never supposed he would say, he cannot help but notice this himself. He has been 'shown up,' but it is not in the eyes or the judgment of others that his defeat has become evident; it is in his own.

"That is why he blushes. He is ashamed of himself, but Socrates has not shamed him. Whatever harm he has incurred in the course of the argument has been self-inflicted. He has made assertions he could not adequately defend and held on to claims which damaged his argument when it would have been better to give them up. He agreed to be the judge of his own responses. Now he is and he sees his own failure. It need not be pointed out to him. He has had enough and he subsides.

"Although Socrates has won he does not claim it as a personal victory. It is the argument, not Socrates, that has carried the day. He does not vaunt in triumph over Thrasymachus, demean him in defeat, or even point a moral. He leaves Thrasmychus with the self-knowledge he has newly gained and trusts to that as the only viable corrective.

"This exemplary exchange displays the true Socratic practice. Here he does what he always does if he can: he helps his fellow conversant see something in himself he would not otherwise have known was there, then lets him decide whether or not he is pleased with what he sees and whether he wants to change it. He seldom has such

dramatic success, but it is all that he ever tries to do. It is what he will do throughout the conversation that follows.

"So everything in Book One ties in with what comes later. If I had to pick out the one thing, though, that is there from first to last and is the most important, it would be the problem of desire and how to order and inform it. Fundamentally that is what the dialogue is about. Justice appears to be its theme, but the search for it serves a larger purpose: to discover what kind of life is best and most to be desired. Once they agree to take the city as a more visible stand-in for the individual soul, desire comes into the picture right away. Socrates brings into being in speech a little city that Glaucon derides as a city of sows. Glaucon wants more than bare necessities; he wants relishes, more of the finer things. Socrates grants his wish and in this way the fever of desire enters the story of the city. With it justice and injustice come in, too."

"That business of taking the city as a stand-in for the soul doesn't seem that compelling to me," Belnap says. "If he wants to talk about politics why not go straight to it and forget about the supposed analogy with the soul?"

"I've often wondered about that too. Maybe it's because talking about politics, in the usual sense at least, isn't the main business of the work. But there is a kind of likeness between the city and the soul. Each is the seat of many motions—often shifting, conflicting, unbridled motions—without any inherent pattern. A city is welter of activities. It takes its shape and character from their complex interplay. It exists to satisfy human needs and wants. If they are kept simple, the city is simple, like the first city proposed by Socrates. But if unchecked, wants tend to grow and grow, pushing the city into all sorts of untoward shapes and possible misadventures. The desires that shape

the city are easier to see than those that shape the soul, which is the reason for looking at it in the first place.

"It's hard to say what the soul itself is. It is agency, aspiration, self-initiated activity, a shapeless urge, an emptiness longing to be filled. Its inherent tendency is toward the good, but there are so many seeming goods and its powers of discernment are so often undeveloped or impaired that its precipitant impulses are more than likely to go awry. That is why it needs to be schooled by the ordering motions of music and gymnastic and formed by apt images; that is why its gaze needs to be diverted from the fleeting attractions immediately at hand and directed toward what is more worthy and enduring.

"The likening of the soul to a city is intended to bring to light the manifold but often obscure desires buried or hidden in its depths, and suggest a pattern for ordering them. I do find it strange, though, that the idea of justice should be found in the image of the city. You expect justice to be something overarching and grand, like the idea of the Good, and then there it is, as Socrates says when they think they've found it, kicking around at their feet all the time; and when he gives his formulation of it—justice is minding one's own business, everybody doing his job—that seems pretty underwhelming. Extracted from the image of the city and applied to the three-part soul it serves the deeper purpose of the dialogue well enough, as it is contrived to do, but as a principle for establishing a polity, I have to doubt its merits. And it makes it so easy to confuse the purpose of the discussion and see a pattern meant only to illuminate the soul as if it is being developed as a plan of action. I can't believe that is what it is."

Here, Brad Ripley, the character in T-shirt and bell bottoms, interrupts. "What about the philosopher-king? Do you think Chairman Mao is a good example of what Plato meant?" (My story, you will remember is set in the 1960's when Mao was still in power.)

"No, I don't," Ned replies. In fact, I don't think Plato actually expected or ever wanted such a ruler to come into being."

"How can you say that? The whole work is devoted to laying out Plato's conception of the ideal state with the philosopher-king at the top. Everyone reads it that way and they always have."

"Maybe so, but I think they've missed the point. The reform Plato wants to institute is not in the city, but in the soul. That is where the kind of change he wants to see must come about and the only place where it is possible. The way the idea of the philosopher-king comes up in the dialogue is itself a clue that we are not supposed to think it is being proposed with a straight face. It is in Book Five, where Socrates warns us not to be afraid of the jokes the wits might make if what he is putting forward came to pass; and where he says he must breast three great waves—waves of laughter, for sure, since he grants that what he suggests will seem preposterous. He proposes to include three things in the city he is embodying in speech: the same education and the same way of life for women as for men, even to the practice of exercising naked in the palaestra; communal marriage arrangements where the children belong to all, but to no one in particular; and a philosopher to rule as king and oversee such a reordering. Socrates says that the point in considering such innovations is not to demonstrate that it would be possible to bring them about. In fact the imaginary city in which these things are said to

occur falls apart after a time because its rules for procreation get so complicated nobody, including the philosopher-king, knows enough to calculate the nuptial number. That seems to be telling us the whole thing is a joke. But these ideas are not barren just because it can't be shown that a real city could be founded like the one they are establishing in their talk."

"So what is the point?" Ripley asks.

"The point is educational. And play is the mode of instruction. It is also polemical in a way. It takes aim at the comic poet Aristophanes, Socrates' great contemporary critic, and says, 'All right, if you want to make me into a comic figure, that's fine. I can outdo you by making proposals more outlandish than any you attributed to me in the *Clouds* or invented in the *Assembly of Women.* But my purpose is not merely satiric. I have serious points to make.'"

"So what points is he making?" Ripley insists.

"At least three," Ned says. "First, men and women do not differ in their souls and there is no inborn superiority that would give one gender the right to rule over the other. He reminds everyone at one point that the philosopher-king could turn out to be a woman. Second, if justice is to come about in the city, the whole question of what is 'my own' must be examined. Why should your son be favored and mine not, or mine preferred but not yours? We all belong to the city, so the story says, and the attachments we form to what is our own breeds faction and disorder, so if the love of justice is real and not merely a pious hope, the question of what is mine and what is yours has to be taken up. When 'my own' is the same for everyone a lot of ugly things disappear from the city. And finally, those who rule ought to know what is good for the city. Who wants ignorance to

rule? So knowledge should inform power and guide its exercise, and anyone aspiring to rule should examine himself to see if he can lay any claim to having it. It always has to be remembered, though, that city building comes into play in the dialogue because the city is taken as a stand-in for the individual soul, and what results from looking at cities and their just ordering has as its point the ordering of the soul. We shouldn't get sidetracked into asking, how would this come about, is this idea practical, would it really work?

"It's easy to forget that the city building that goes on is playful. Even the participants themselves don't always remember it. In Book Seven, after several fervent speeches defending the place of philosophy in the city, Socrates apologizes for getting carried away. 'I forgot that we were only playing and spoke too intensely' he says. A moment later he goes on to say that the best way to educate is not through forced studies, but through play. No forced study abides in a soul he tells us. As men 'telling tales in a tale,' to use Socrates' description of their activity, they are not coerced by reality and are free to see and say many things that can't be taken straightforwardly as part of any blueprint for an actual city. The philosopher-king is one of these. They imitate the action of building in speech but they don't really intend to do any building. It's one of the many ways imitation comes into the dialogue."

"Imitation? Doesn't Plato have a pretty low opinion of that?" Ripley wants to know.

"He sometimes seems to. The poets and playwrights in that early discussion of them in Book Three get a good going over for their uses of it. Instead of employing straightforward narration, they imitate speeches and that is said to be a fault. But that

assessment gets really interesting when you recall the first line of the *Republic* itself. 'I went down to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon,' Socrates says. Thus begins a narrative which turns almost at once into a drama that imitates the action of a long night of talk (surely imaginary) in which Socrates recollects the speeches of many different characters. In this imitation of a dialogue, the participants take up the issue of imitation and subject it to a critique. In the beginning of Book Ten, in fact, Socrates and Glaucon set themselves the task of finally seeing and saying what imitation really is, and once again the way the poets use and misuse it comes under scrutiny. Part of the fun of this is that Socrates, having been indicted by Aristophanes in the *Clouds*, now brings him and all the makers of poetry before the bar of knowledge and truth where they do not fare well. This turning of the tables is a source of some delight, but something more important is going on as well. We see, if we are paying attention, that when it comes to imitations there are better and worse ones—and it is important to learn to tell the difference—but the practice of using them is inescapable. When we are talking about the highest things, the good itself or justice itself, or the beautiful itself, no one has ever seen them. The very best exemplars of them are only copies, representations, images, imitations. So the best we can do is look for the best imitations of them. That is what Plato himself, by means of this artful imitation, is showing us about imitations. And this is not the only case, by the way, where an unseemly practice imitated by the poets is made subject to censure within the dialogue while the participants themselves indulge in it. Socrates says at one point that Homer's account of the gods being overcome by laughter shouldn't be accepted because such behavior is not appropriate; and being a lover of laughter is chided, too, but this never stops the characters in the dialogue from laughing aloud.

"Still, the serious point amidst the jesting and play is that we are not born knowing how to be human, and what Plato brings out so powerfully is that we become what we are, in large measure, through what we choose to imitate."

"Even if what you say is true, I still don't get it. Why go to such elaborate lengths to make a point? Why envelop everything in so many levels of meaning and deliberately create paradoxes? Doesn't that just increase the chances of the point being missed?"

"Well, partly just for the fun of it. It puts Plato in the company of poets and comic playwrights where he wants to show he can hold his own. It seems clear that he likes to portray characters and display their interactions almost as much as he enjoys the play of ideas. So he is an imitator among imitators, but it is important to him to show how and why he outperforms the others as an educator of youth. I think another reason is that he wants to show Socrates as he was and not as he was viewed by many of his contemporaries. To us Socrates is a hero of thought, one of the greatest men that ever lived. That is due entirely to Plato's art. If we knew him only through the works of Aristophanes and Xenophon, he wouldn't loom very large. We also need to remember that to a majority of his fellow citizens Socrates was a n'er-do-well, an idler, a public nuisance, a convicted and condemned criminal guilty of irreligion and of corrupting the young. Plato saw him otherwise and it is his character as Plato portrayed it that we esteem. In the *Republic*, as in many other dialogues, we find Socrates engaging the young and we see how bogus the charge of being their corrupter was. We also get a glimpse of what Socrates actually thought about the gods his fellow-citizens claimed to worship, and we can decide for ourselves what justice there might have been in the charge of irreligion. In the *Apology* and elsewhere, Socrates affirms his own piety, but this piety, so different

from that of his time and place, was seen by his detractors and accusers as impiety. Anyway, if Plato had simply written a tract expressing his own views, or even recounted the opinions of Socrates in narrative form, this wouldn't have happened."

"Socrates might not be corrupting the young, but he does seem to lead them around by the nose and influence them way too much."

"Really? It's true he's canny, he does talk a lot, and he does see where the conversation might be going in ways that his interlocutors don't. But the whole basis of these dialogues is that the discussion cannot move forward unless everyone sees where they are at every important turning point and agrees to accept, at least tentatively, any conclusions they may have reached. Socrates suggests directions, he articulates possibilities, he brings out absurdities and all that, but every man sees for himself—or he doesn't—and the conversations could never be what they are if the participants were not free to disagree at any time and even break off the discussion, as in many dialogues they do."

"But in the *Republic*, if they are only playing at making laws for a pretend city as you say, I still don't see what this accomplishes."

"The two young men, Glaucon and Adeimanthus, who engage Socrates most frequently and directly in the discussion, are not just anybody. They are Plato's brothers. They are well-born and well-connected. They have thought about rule and probably have some appetite for it, especially Glaucon. What should they see and understand before they are fit for it? They ought to know their own desires, but these are hidden in the depths where, in the murk of personal passions, private attachments, and commonplace assumptions, it is hard to see what is going on. In order to glimpse not only what is

desired, but what might be desirable, some means of illumination must be found. That is where the playful building of a city comes in. As Glaucon and Adeimathus become imaginary legislators the desires that move cities—the desires that abide in their own souls and the souls of others like them—are taken up fancifully. This, ironically enough, frees them up for serious consideration and allows their worthiness to be assayed.

"Socrates' quarrel with the poets is a good example. These young men have been raised on Homer. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are something like biblical texts for them; they know them almost by heart, but that does not mean they see clearly what is in them—far from it. By asking whether or not to let the poets into their imaginary city, they get a chance to consider their teachings anew. It turns out that the ideas of gods and men and their relations portrayed in these texts are not as edifying as they seem. In fact, when Socrates helps them take a fresh look at them, these ideas are seen to be corrupt and corrupting. But the point is not to ban the poets from an actual city, Athens or any other, then or now. It is only, once they can be seen for what they are, to ban their influence from the souls of these young men. Thus the city they are establishing in speech is, as Socrates puts it, "a pattern...laid up for the man who wants to see and found a city within himself on the basis of what he sees." So his fanciful condemnation of the poets is itself poetic, a kind of poetic justice carried out in play. He undertakes his reform through—"

"Lies!" Marston, who has sat silent and sullen up until now breaks in. "Lies. In your whitewash, how do you reckon with Socrates' endorsement of lies and his use of them?"

"I don't see him endorsing them. They are spoken of a good many times but not in the accents of praise. The poets are often said to lie, especially about the gods, and

they are not applauded for it. A real lie, 'a lie in the soul' is said to be hated by gods and men and swallowing lies is condemned. In the city that they are constructing in speech a great deal of stress is placed on training up guardians who can recognize falsehoods and will hate them. It is true that Socrates says a lie is sometimes useful to human beings: a doctor might have to lie to a patient he is treating, but the practice is not one he recommends in general. In Book Five he does say that rulers might sometimes have to lie to citizens for their benefit, and he uses the doctor-patient relationship as an analogy, but that can hardly be taken as an endorsement. The rulers spoken of are rulers in the fable which is being told at that moment, and it is about a fantastic city where all the wives, husbands and children are in common. It is a city so unlikely that Socrates acknowledges that it would take many drugs, in the form of lies, to keep any such city alive. So even this apparent recommendation, I would argue, is undercut by irony. It is only endorsed in an imaginary city that could never be."

"How do you know? If there is irony, how can you be sure where it resides? Maybe he is winking when he praises truth-telling, while saying in fact, 'Those of us who really know what's what, know we have to lie and here are some examples of when and how to do it.'"

"I suppose we could see him as such a dissembler, seeming to endorse truth-telling at the level of appearance while really promoting lies. But I can't think that is what is intended. In my opinion we can get the good out of these stories only if we stay inside them, let them work on our imaginations and take them figuratively rather than literally. We can't translate them directly into a plan of action, or transport their imagined characters into a place we call reality. It is too big a jump. You wouldn't put a

hobbitt down in modern Manhattan and expect him to thrive. The thin men in the city of speech can never have any life but there. They are caricatures, too simple to survive anywhere else, too one-dimensional for any thinker to want to remake actual humans in their image. The city imagined and described at its various stages and its many remodelings in the course of the dialogue is a political cartoon, provocative and illustrative, but not a proposal or a plan for building anything.

"Taken in a certain way and seen only from the outside, in the manner of some of its critics, the *Republic* seems to be an ugly book. In this respect it resembles its narrator. Alcibiades says in the *Symposium* that when he saw Socrates from the outside—odd, obstinate and ugly as a satyr—he found nothing attractive, but when Socrates' words opened up to him what was inside, he saw beauty there that recalled the figure of a god. This, for sure, is the ultimate Socratic irony; in a time and place where manly beauty is most prized he embodies the notion that the inner being triumphs over outward appearance, whether ugly or splendid, and is all that really matters. With the *Republic*, too, the outer look and the inner meaning are often at odds and are easily confused. Again and again the fables must be turned inside out and opened up before their meaning is revealed. The city that is being considered may look like a regime devised to control the masses, but it is really arranged to protect everyone from the high and the mighty, the bellicose and strong, by teaching them, if they would be rulers, to begin by ruling themselves."

Ned looks around the table. No one seems ready to try to stop him, so he continues.

"In fact, if we want to see irony at work in the matter of lying, we ought to look at the most famous instance of it, the 'noble lie' in Book Three. The first thing to ponder is what is noble about it. And the answer, I think, is that it is a lie primarily directed to the nobles. When we read the fable about the iron, bronze, silver and golden souls all being born out of the earth, and therefore children of the same mother, but with the silver and gold souls fated to be its guardians and possible rulers, we read it as democrats, as born and bred egalitarians, and are outraged. Here, we think, a lie is told to justify a repressive regime that keeps the lower orders in their place. But that isn't really its function. It is to keep the guardians, the strongest and most war-like citizens, from doing harm.

"Once you have a city that demands to be supplied with luxuries, as Socrates points out early in the discussion when Glaucon derides his little story about the true city as a city fit for sows, you will need more land and more wealth and an army to get it and once that happens, you have a new problem: how to keep the strong from dominating the weak and taking all they have. It is in response to that dilemma that the 'noble lie' is told. The best born, the truly strong, the most spirited, able, and fine have something inside themselves more worthy than any outward thing, and the highest and best will keep it inviolate. They will not debase themselves by using their strength against their fellow citizens. They will live in a barracks, eat simple food, own nothing, have no family of their own and guard the city simply for the honor of it. In this arrangement the souls made of baser metals get all the external goods. The better souls take the story of their inner superiority as their chief reward and in this way protect the city not only from its enemies but from themselves. What's more the lie is not noble, and is not said to be noble, in the usual sense. It's no high and shining thing. It has no splendor."

"What do you mean?' Marston demands.

"It's well-born. Not splendid or fine," Ned says. "That would be *kalos*, or possibly *esthlos* and Socrates uses neither. It is well-born in the sense that its lineage is known and remembered and of the finest; it is a story engendered for a worthy purpose: to illuminate and instruct."

"Show me that in the text," Marston demands, tossing his copy of the *Republic* across the table at Ned.

The text is in the original Greek, a language in which Ned is less than expert—he probably never would have seen the point he is making, in fact, if a friend of his in Classics had not told him about it—but he knows where to look. He opens it and finds the passage he wants at 414c. "Here it is. See, right there, *gennaion*," he says, handing it back to Marston. "Not splendid or fine or admirable. Well-born." Marston stares for a moment at the passage Ned has shown him, slams the book shut and resumes his brooding silence.

But Ned cannot stop now. "The *Republic* is a comedy that is told in the aftermath of tragedy. At the time Plato writes it, the glory days of Greece are gone. The Athenians, their allies and their foes, have looked into their myths, the work of their greatest poetic minds, and in their likeness have made for themselves a real life drama with a terrible outcome. To see the true politics of the work it helps to keep this in mind.

"Think about that speech Thucydides puts in the mouth of Pericles in the famous eulogy he gives after an early battle of the Peloponnesian War. Declaring Athens to be the school of Hellas and citing the many virtues that make it worth defending at all costs, he declares that anyone who fights for his city has a cloak to cover his imperfections,

because this good action blots out anything bad he might have done. As for those who lay down their lives as an offering, they will achieve a renown that never grows old, and will have for a sepulchre, not the one where their bones are placed, but the noblest shrine of all, the human heart, where their glory will be laid up eternally and recalled whenever great deeds are commemorated.

"What is this but a tale to beguile young men—young men who share the epic hero's thirst for glory, who long to do brave deeds in imitation of him, and have been schooled to emulate his valor? Thus are local heroes bred. The warrior-hero's excellence is hitched to the city's needs and the citizen is taught to die for it in order to live eternally in the hearts of men.

"There is another speech, or part of a speech, often in the mouths of the Athenians that ought to be remembered here, too. Pericles gives a version of it, as do others, but no statement of it is balder than the one Thucydides reports in the Melian dialogue. There the Athenians demand subjection from the Melians and offer no alternative but death. In the exchange that follows they make their view of justice plain: the strong, they say, take what they can and the weak yield what they must.

"This is the view that Thrasymachus put forward and he and Socrates went to the mat about back in Book One: justice is the advantage of the stronger. Thrasymachus saw that he had lost the argument and subsided, but he wasn't fully persuaded and neither were the others. The real case for giving it up it had yet to be made and everything that follows has been laying the grounds for making it.

"The view Socrates is up against is this: be strong, take what you can, fight to protect what you have taken, and if in doing this you chance to die, be assured that your

name will live forever and your glory will never end. This is the code of imperial Athens, stated in words very much like this by Pericles himself. If I were looking around for something to call a noble lie, this would be it. It's probably too big a jump to suppose Socrates saw it exactly that way. But I think he means to provide an alternative to this notion of what is best, although he does not confront it directly. He sees what is worthy in it: its ambition, its aspiration, the way it, like all desires, aims at something that appears to be good. What he wants them to see is that this is not really the best that a man can do.

"He knows that he and his interlocutors share a common wish, one that is playfully expressed in the mode of address he sometimes employs: 'best of men' he will often say to someone talking with him. This might seem like flattery, irony, or even condescension, and maybe sometimes it is, but it also reflects an ambition he is sure they all share: to be the best. There is no reason to think he was wrong about this. If we knew nothing from his time but the meaning of the word *aristos* and the names of some of its prominent figures we would know that being the best mattered: Aristotle, Aristophanes, Aristodemus—it would be easy to reel off a score of such names. Even Plato, the son of Ariston, although he is known to us by a nickname, was actually called Aristocles at birth.

"But there's plenty of evidence besides modes of address and names. Competition to be the best was everywhere in those days, in ordinary life and in special celebrations. Athletes competed, and so did orators and dramatists. To win the prize and be seen to be the best was a central and shared ambition.

"An arresting feature of this competition to be the best, oddly enough, is that it is only meaningful if it takes place among equals, or at least those presumed to be equal

until they battle it out to see who is superior. There's no honor in besting an opponent who never had a chance in the first place. If this is felt sufficiently it can serve to constrain the actions of the mighty and powerful. It may be the only real constraint there can ever be on them. If they can't control their own actions by drawing on something in themselves, what can control them? By their own code, taken at its best, the Athenians should have been ashamed of themselves for their destruction of the Melians. It wasn't a noble or splendid deed that was done there but one that was ugly and base.

"As a check on aggressive impulses shame may not seem very powerful, and it wouldn't be if it weren't for the way its opposite, pride, comes into it. These men aim to shine in the eyes of others and in their own. They do not wish to do, or be seen to do, anything that is not fine. In the *Republic* Socrates brings this into play as Glaucon and Adeimanthus aid him in setting up the city in speech which comes to be called, although not without irony, Kallipolis, the beautiful city. Anything that is not splendid or fine is to be banished from this city. That includes greed, envy, unbridled appetite, tyrannical ambitions, the suppression of women and the overbearing of the weak by the strong. Just as they are disposed to exclude or expel them from the city they are constructing in speech, so too, if they find such base and ugly desires lurking in their own souls, will they be inclined to expel them from there.

"I believe this is what Socrates means in the *Gorgias* when he declares himself to be the only man in Athens to practice the true art of politics. Any reform he might effect must come about soul by individual soul. In attempting this reform he does not lay down a new rule or utter a new commandment; he takes the love of the best that exists in

everyone and informs and elevates it. The urge to excel is not denied, condemned, repressed, or extirpated. It is inspired to seek the good in some other form.

"Socrates has a vision of the human soul as something in each of us that is most our own, more precious than anything else, incapable of being marred or debased by anyone but ourselves. To be the best, to honor ourselves, to never be ashamed of what we are, we must devote ourselves to keeping it forever unblemished and fair. This comes out, among other places, in the fable Socrates tells at the end of the *Gorgias.* In this account—something of a grand prevarication itself, perhaps—the souls of the departed are stripped naked to appear in the underworld for their final judgment. This looks like a scare-tactic meant to frighten those unable or unwilling to be persuaded by argument into becoming just and good. But it may be intended to encourage another assessment. You cannot imagine how your naked soul might appear in the eyes of its final judge without bringing it before your own. If it is mutilated, misshapen and ugly because of your deeds, you are likely to be repelled by it yourself and undertake to mar it no more.

"Your soul, Socrates is telling his young friends, is in your care, and keeping it blameless and fine is your business, a business that, if properly attended to by each will bring into being the just regime. In a polity so ordered, where the love of the good is the regulating principle—although no one has seen it fully or can claim to know it—where each individual is in command of himself and needs to be commanded by no other, where rule is self-rule only, justice will be done. Whether this is an adequate basis for a political order may be rightly disputed, but if there is a danger in it, it is not that of a moral tyranny imposed from the top down by someone superior in knowledge, for the philosopher-king in such a case would be superfluous, a kind of benign joke. The danger

is that it may prove too weak to restrain the aggressive and overbold and may not provide a sufficient motive for pursuing the common good.

"Whatever else the Republic may be it is not a work about repression. It is about aspiration and self-command. Think of the way it ends. The last story Socrates tells is not about the crowning of a king, the triumph of a class, or the handing down of the tablets of the law. Something like that might be expected from an exercise in political planning, but that is not what it is about. It is about choosing the life that is most worthy. The story of Er the Pamphylian, who is privileged to watch men choose their lives as they come into the world, is a cautionary tale. It reminds us that each of us chooses our life by the things we want, the impulses we yield to, the actions we take, the habits we form. It is the folly of most men to rush toward the things that seem best at a glance. We ought instead to look around carefully, be wily as Odysseus, that many-minded man, and choose with care.

"But there is another life choice not portrayed in the tale of Er. It is a life patterned by an appetite for discourse, a spirited pursuit of the good and an ardent desire for its comprehension. It is the life which is strongest and best; its living image is Socrates, the storyteller himself and it is the life which we ourselves are invited, if we are fit for it, to choose."

This is the climax of "The Defense," and I will end my excerpt here, but in order not to leave you in suspense I will do what Socrates did not do and tell you how my story ends. Ned does pass the exam, over Marston Dupree's vehement objections. As for my own hope that by writing out this story it might save the seminar, I've had one occasion to find out since I wrote it and I can't say that it has brought much relief to my students, my

seminar partner, or me. I'm still too inclined to put too much of this in there. And yet it is never enough.

But 'enough!' is surely the cry of each and every one of you by now. So enough.