#492

Plato's Sicilian Expeditions

Peter Pesic

We are accustomed to thinking that Plato's great personal encounter was with Socrates, and that is surely right. But after Socrates's death Plato lived forty-six years more in which he did not just write dialogues, as great as they are. Today I would like to discuss his three voyages to Sicily and try to assess their significance for him and for us. They represent his attempts to engage with political realities and to act on them; as such, they are crucial additions to the testimony of the dialogues, especially since Plato himself asserted that "there is not and will not be any written work of Plato's own. What are now called his are the work of a Socrates embellished and modernized." (*Letters* 314c) We need to come to grips with this remarkable assertion not only to probe what Plato came to understand about human nature and political life but what we in turn should think. Thus, my main object is to tell stories that need to be ever retold and to ask questions.

Plato's voyages have an important and immediate context: the Peloponnesian War (431-404) and especially its critical Sicilian phase (414-413). Plato first visited Sicily only twenty-six years after the great debacle of the Athenian expedition, which was practically destroyed as it tried to conquer Syracuse. Thucidydes viewed this as perhaps the turning-point of the war and presented it as a sweeping tragic drama of Athenian ambition and overreaching. In view of that disasterous significance, what was Plato doing returning to Syracuse only a few years later?

This is a story of three Sicilians: two tyrants each named Dionysius and of the man Plato said responded to him "more keenly and more enthusiastically than any other young man I ever met," (327 a-b) Dion. They form a study in human character that deserve a great tragedian's pen. Bear in mind that, despite what we think of as its Italian location, beginning in the mid-eighth century Sicily was the jewel of Magna Graecia, "Greater Greece," the colonies that contained more Greeks than their mother cities themselves. Magna Graecia was not only an outpost of Hellenic civilization but in many aspects a generative center: think of the flourishing Pythagorean school of Plato's intimate friend Archytas at Tarentum, but also of Zeno of Elea, Empedocles of Akagras (Agrigento). Among these, Syracuse was the largest and wealthiest city, settled originally by Corinthians, with a superb natural harbor and eminently defensible island stronghold, the Ortygia or inner city.

In the complex politics, the Carthaginians loomed large, all too near on the African coast, along with the Phoenicians, not to speak of other Greek colonies at Segesta and elsewhere throughout Sicily. Syracuse itself had a democratic interlude that

---

A lecture given at St. John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico on July 21, 2004.

coincided with the Athenian expedition against Sicily during the Peloponnesian War. But in 405 an unknown, low-born clerk named Dionysius gathered political authority to himself by playing on the fear of the Carthaginians. He was the first of that name, sometimes called "the Great"; later we will encounter his son Dionysius II, who succeeded him as tyrant of Syracuse.

The title *tyrannos* here requires special attention. In earliest times, it denoted someone who came to supreme political power not through inheritance (as did a *basileus*, a king) but in some extraordinary way. Thus Oedipus was invited to become *tyrannos* of Thebes because he solved the Sphinx's riddle, without any implication thereby that he was (as we would say) at all tyrannical. So too Plato addresses his letters to "Dionysius, tyrant of Sicily" with the expectation that that would be a polite salutation. However, soon enough the word started to acquire the dark associations it now has because of the typical behavior of the tyrants, who tended to use all the machinations we think of as Machiavellian. Dionysius I himself has been compared to a *Führer* type.[1] However, he was no insane demagogue, though he doubtless knew how to inflame the crowd with well-chosen rhetoric. His nominal position was that of *strategos autokrator*, a general with unlimited powers, elected annually by the assembly. As such, in the earlier part of his thirty-eight year rule he achieved important successes in keeping the Carthaginians from taking over all of Sicily, restricting them to their original foothold in the northwest of the island. He was shrewd and unscrupulous but able in military affairs, discarding traditional practices and anticipating the tactics of Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great. By so doing, he created an empire that stretched well into Italy and made Syracuse not only the wealthiest and most powerful city in Greece, but in Europe. He was an adroit politician who knew how to play on the fear of the Carthaginians to maintain his own power; indeed, in his later years the Carthaginians gained so much ground in Sicily that he began to pay tribute to them. It did not hurt that he had ten thousand barbarian mercenaries at his command, the "adamantine chains" with which he said he secured his power. In his time, he was alternately hailed as the savior of Greek civilization in Sicily and reviled as the symbol of absolute power and despotism, the man who threatened the liberty of all Greece.

Beside all this, he wrote tragedies and regularly competed for the prize in Athens, which he finally won. He often invited literary men to be instructors or revisers of his poems and was so elated by their flattering words that he boasted more of his poems than of his successes in war. One of these visitors was a poet named Philoxenus, distinguished in his time but whose own works have been lost and whose words with the tyrant deserve recollection.[2] Dionysius summoned him to hear his latest and ask his judgment. (The Greek word for judgment is *krisis*.) When he replied frankly, Dionysius was so offended that he commanded his servants to drag him away to the quarries. Released at the entreaty of some friends, Dionysius made up with him and even invited him back to dinner with the same friends. As the drinking advanced, Dionysius could not help asking Philoxenus for his opinion about some other verses he had written. Philoxenus called the servant over to him and asked him to take him to the quarries. Dinysius could not help smiling at his wit, but continued to ask him desist from his

frankness, as did his friends. Then Philoxenus made a paradoxical offer: he would both respect the truth and keep the favor of Dionysius. When the tyrant-poet read him verses describing some harrowing events and asked his opinion, Philoxenus said "Piteous!" (*oiktra*), thus giving a favorable interpretation of the subject, but at the same time indicating his true opinion of the work. I think that Dionysius as tragic poet puts the quarrel between poetry and philosophy in a new light: if the tyrant aspires to poetry, can the poet aspire to tyranny?

Dionysius's ambitions did not end with poetry but also reached to philosophy. He and Plato were brought together by the hero of the story, Dion, a wealthy and high-born citizen of Sicily who was in fact Dionysius's cousin and brother-in-law. (Dionysius had married two wives simultaneously, perhaps the privilege of a tyrant: Andromache, sister of Dion, from Sicily and Doris from nearby Locri, whom he treated with surprising even-handedness.) It is not clear how Dion came to be Plato's student; Plato speaks of him also as a guest and friend, suggesting familial connections also. We will consider at the end evidence showing Plato was deeply in love with Dion. For his part, Dion was set aflame by Plato's philosophy, as Plutarch puts it, "and in the simple innocence of youth, concluding, from his own disposition, that the same reason would work the same effects upon Dionysius," he wanted to bring them together. The result was Plato's first invitation to visit the tyrant's court (389-388). He arrived ten years after the execution of Socrates and fifteen after the end of the Peloponnesian war; Dion was then twenty years old and Plato forty, a year older than Dionysius.

Plato's intentions on this and his subsequent visits to Sicily consistently revolved around three basic policies to which he wanted to sway its rulers. First of all, "Let not Sicily nor any city anywhere be subject to human masters--such is my doctrine--but to laws." (334c) Though this has become a commonplace, I would like to stress the radical force of this idea, which strikes against arbitrary rule, whether of a single despot, an oligarchy, or an unbridled democracy. We are liable to take this for granted since our nation has enshrined the precept that we are governed by laws, not by men. In so doing, we are directly indebted to Plato and his radical vision. To be sure, he did not invent this concept, due to the ancient lawmakers like Solon or Lycurgus, whom he often praises. But Plato set this idea on a rational foundation rather than only relying on traditional respect paid to ancient and more-than-human sages. Indeed, he argued that Dionysius could and should take up their lawmaking and thus rightly earn the gratitude of mankind. To do so, Plato set forth the philosophic life as the essential preparation and guide for this supremely daring and demanding undertaking.

That meant that Dionysius needed to be educated so that he could understand thoroughly how to set forth the laws rightly. But because the notorious luxury of Sicilian life always acted to undermine the kind of hard work and selfless devotion that philosophy requires, Plato wanted the ruler to live far more austerely and thus set a powerful example that would change the court and, through it, the whole society. "The god of sober men is law; the god of fools is pleasure." (354e-355a) Plato's ultimate goal was the restoration not only of Syracuse, but of all the other Greek cities of Sicily. Dionysius had inherited a rich empire. If Plato could persuade him, he by himself might

transform it into an empire of excellence, the realization of the Hellenic vision as Plato understood it.

Though daring, these goals show a notable grasp of political realities along with the ideal vision one would expect of Plato. In particular, he did not attempt to implement the most radical ideas he set forth in his *Republic,* such as communality of property and women, which he doubtless judged not feasible. Such is the ironic quality of the *Republic* that some doubt whether he ever meant those proposals to be taken altogether seriously. But he held to the most fundamental point: "Unless the philosophers rule as kings or those now called kings and chiefs genuinely and adequately philosophize, and political power and philosophy coincide in the same place,... there is no rest from ills for the cities, my dear Glaucon, nor I think for human kind..." (473d) If so, he must have felt that he could not fail to try to persuade Dionysius, through Dion, to take up philosophy and transform tyranny into the rule of law.

The result was so disastrous as to be almost comical. In contrast to some later philosophers who were eager to gain the ear of the ruler, Plato took a stern line with Dionysius. He began by demonstrating that tyrants lacked fortitude and were miserable, in comparison to the just. Dionysius was greatly annoyed, especially since those around him were full of admiration for Plato "and captivated with his doctrine." In a rage, he asked Plato what business he had in Sicily. Plato answered "I came to seek a virtuous man" and Dionysius replied dryly "It seems you have lost your labor." But finally they confronted each other squarely. Dionysius: "You talk like an old fool"; Plato: "And you like a tyrant."[3] Seeing this debacle, Dion arranged to have Plato conveyed home, but (as Plutarch tells it) Dionysius privately convinced a fellow passenger, Pollis the Spartan, either to kill Plato en route or sell him into slavery. When they reached Aegina, then at war with Athens, Pollis sold Plato into slavery.

None of Plato's surviving letters mention this incident, though Diogenes Laertius tells that Anniceris of Cyrene ransomed Plato from the slave market at Aegina. Does Plato's silence mean that this event was a unrelated act of piracy that did not really involve Dionysius or, if it did, was Plato tactfully suppressing it in order not to rouse Dionysius's wrath against Dion and his party? Or was it too painful a memory? Whatever may be the case, I think that there is an interesting reflection of this episode in Plato's *Republic,* which probably appeared some years later. In Book V, very near to the center of the dialogue, Socrates had started addressing the four bad regimes and was "arrested" a second time by his friends and made to address the most paradoxical parts of his ideal regime, especially the community of women and children. In response to their, insistence Socrates remarks "Then we too must swim and try to save ourselves from the argument, hoping that some dolphin might take us on his back or some other desperate rescue." (453e) This is an unmistakable reference to the story of Arion, the celebrated lyre-player and composer who had voyaged to Sicily, gained wealth, and was traveling home when his crew seized him and told him either to kill himself or throw himself into the sea.[4] Unable to buy them off, Arion dressed himself in his robes and launched into his song. At the end, he jumped into the sea, robes and all. The ship sailed off, but a passing dolphin carried Arion away to shore, where his safe return

confounded the murderous crew. I think Plato enjoyed some private humor here, having been saved in similar peril. His implication may be that the sweet song of philosophy may, like Arion's, have charmed even the beasts to save him. If so, his image encodes both philosophy's peril and its power.

Whatever may have reached his ears, Dionysius did not hold this episode against Dion, whom he continued to trust with important missions to Carthage and allowed to speak his mind openly and even to criticize, the only man at court with that liberty. In 367, Dionysius I died, probably as a result of an overdose of sleeping potion administered by order of his son who then became Dionysius II. (It may say something about the Sicilian court that Dionysius II married his half-sister (by the other wife), though in the course of time Dion came to marry his neice.)

The first actions of the new ruler were promising; he proclaimed a three-year exemption from taxes, released many political prisoners, and recalled Philistus, a counselor banished by his father. At his very first council, his uncle Dion spoke so well "that he made all the rest [of his advisers] appear in their politics but children, and in their votes rather slaves than counselors." Dion offered to conclude an honorable peace with the Carthaginians or, if Dionysius preferred war, Dion offered to fit out and maintain fifty galleys ready to fight. The young tyrant was impressed with his "greatness of mind and received his offer with satisfaction." Dion became his chief adviser and even declared his intention to transform his government from tyranny to kingship and to plant settlers in the Greek cities of Sicily, just as Plato had asked.

In this atmosphere, in 366 Dion, now forty-three, wrote asking Plato, now sixty-two, to come once again. Twenty-two years had passed since his first, disastrous visit, which he doubtless remembered all too well. One can imagine his great misgivings. Had he not stayed aloof from Athenian politics, never said a word in their assembly on the grounds that "he would be risking his life in vain without any hope of accomplishing anything"? (322b) On the occasion that Plato testified for an Athenian general being tried for his life, an informer accosted him and said "What, are you going to speak for the defense? Don't you know that the hemlock of Socrates awaits you?" To which Plato replied: "As I faced dangers when serving in the cause of my country, so I will face them now in the cause of duty for a friend." Even testifying in court could be dangerous.

But Dion wrote him "what combination of circumstances more promising than that which is at this moment offered us by a kind of miracle, are we to wait for?" Dionysius II was young and interested; his father had been too old and set in his ways. Furthermore, Dion's nephews and kindred needed Plato's presence and influence so that they too could help win over Dionysius. "'Now, if ever, then,' said he, 'will be realized any hope there is that the world will ever see the same man both philosopher and ruler of a great city.'" (328a)

Plato could not decline; Dion had quoted his own long-held vision. To be sure, he had his doubts about Dionysius, "for young men have sudden impulses and often quite contradictory ones." (328b) But he loved Dion, who was no longer a youth, and relied on him. "Now was the time for the trial. If I were to convince but one man, that in itself would ensure complete success." (328c) He goes on to confess that "I feared to see

myself at last altogether nothing but words, so to speak -- a man who would never willingly lay hand to any concrete task." Moreover, he was bound to Dion in friendship and recognized that Dion was in considerable danger because he continued to press Plato's ideas at whatever risk. The word "trial" has great weight here, as it does when it recurs almost obsessively in the many scenes of trial and defense throughout Plato's dialogues, whether in jest or deadly earnest. Here, the trial was not only of Plato's ideas by actions but of Plato himself. As with Socrates, the stakes are mortal, but here the jury is housed in Plato's mind and the accuser would be Dion himself, if Plato should forsake him. Plato vividly imagines his words: "Do you suppose you will ever escape the charge of cowardice by pleading the distance to be traveled, the long voyage, and the great hardships? Not by a great deal." Above all, in Greek, *kakia* (badness, evil) meant cowardice.

Plato was received grandly, brought to the city in a royal chariot. For the first months, his words fell on receptive ears; it is said that sand was spread on the floors of the palace so that the numerous students of mathematics could draw their geometrical diagrams. Imagine the White House with blackboards everywhere. During a temple ceremony a few days later, when a priest prayed for the long and safe continuance of the tyranny, Dionysius cried out, "Leave off praying for evil upon us."

This extraordinary preference for Plato filled others with jealousy: if he had already such an influence over the ruler, they had to end it or face ruin. The leader of this party was his father's court historian and advisor Philistus, whom Dionysius had recalled and who was a great advocate of tyranny and friend of tyrants. Many other sophists came to seek the tyrant's favor and advanced themselves by ministering to his pleasures and encouraging his vices. Indeed, he had long live close confined by his father, who excluded him from cares of state and hence left him quite ignorant. The suspicious father had everyone, even his son, strip-searched before entering his presence; often the son spent his days making little chariots out of wood, lacking any other entertainment. So when he finally gained his freedom he did not hesitate to give himself to pleasure. Where the elder tyrant had bound his realm with "adamantine chains," his dissolute son once spent ninety days straight in drunken debauchery, "in all which time no person on business was allowed to appear, nor was any serious conversation heard at court, but drinking, singing, dancing, and buffoonery reigned there without control."

Dion was no companion in these revels. Plutarch notes that "there was in his natural character something stately, austere, reserved, and unsociable in conversation." Even his intimate friends, who loved his integrity and generosity, "blamed his manner, and thought that he treated those with whom he had to do less courteously and affably than became a man engaged in civil business." Even Plato thought his nature almost too serious and advised him that "popular favor is a means to achievement, while an arbitrary temper has solitude for company." (321b-c) Indeed, it was not hard to blacken Plato: was not his advocacy of philosophy merely a strategem to bemuse and distract the ruler while Dion and his family seized the throne for themselves? As Plutarch notes,

> Others professed to be indignant that the Athenians, who formerly had come to Sicily with a great fleet and a numerous land army, and perished miserably without being able to take the city of Syracuse, should now, by means of one sophister, overturn the sovereignty of Dionysius; inveighing him to cashier his guard to ten thousand horse and many times over that number of foot, and go seek in the schools an unknown and imaginary bliss, and learn by the mathematics how to be happy; while, in the meantime, the substantial enjoyments of absolute power, riches, and pleasure would be handed over to Dion and his sister's children.

This comparison plays sarcastically with the great contrast between the Athenians' Sicilian expedition and Plato's, at least as it seemed at the time, the one so ill-fated, the other so successful. But it is a disturbing comparison, for the miserable remnant of the great Athenian force, the seven thousand who survived, were incarcerated in the quarries that became known afterward as "the ears of Dionysius," because of their ear-like openings and internal canals, whispering galleries where the Syracusans could listen to the miserable plots of their captives. The threat is scarcely veiled: this Athenian too will perish whispering vainly into the tyrant's ear. Surely Plato saw those caverns, perhaps during his first visit, before he wrote the *Republic.* (Much later, the tomb of Archimedes was placed nearby.) The great image of the Cave at its center may have its origin there, but also, I think, in another place. Many years ago in Athens, I found on a map a location titled "Prison of Socrates." With difficulty I finally found it on the hill behind the Acropolis. It was a cave. From inside, you look back up at the Parthenon, towering high above, its back turned.

These suspicions of disloyalty were not hard to nurture in Dionysius; finally, an episode engineered by Philistus contrived to make Dionysius feel that Dion had been dealing with the Carthaginians behind his back. While publicly professing friendship, privately Dionysius taxed Dion with his accusations but did not let him reply. He forced him into a boat taking him to Italy, into banishment. The citizens of Syracuse hoped for some disturbance that might overturn the tyrant; Dionysius attempted to scotch such hopes by insisting that Dion had been sent away for his own protection, though this admitted that he was in danger from his master. But Dionysius allowed Dion the full use of his own great wealth while abroad.

At the same time, Dionysius removed Plato to rooms inside his castle, making him a kind of captive, lest he escape and tell the world what really had happened to Dion. Plutarch notes that "moreover, time and conversations (as wild beasts by use grow tame and tractable) had brought Dionysius to endure Plato's company and discourse, so that he began to love the philosopher, but with such an affection as had something of the tyrant in it, requiring of Plato that he should, in return for his kindness, love him only, and attend to him above all other men." Especially it galled him that Plato remained loyal to Dion and would not say that he preferred Dionysius. In this, he showed the petulance and jealousy of a lover; "frequently he was angry and fell out with him, and presently begged and entreated to be friends again. He was beyond measure desirous to

be Plato's scholar, and to proceed in the study of philosophy, and yet he was ashamed of it with those who spoke against it and professed to think it would ruin him."

The impasse was broken by a war that claimed Dionysius's attention; he sent Plato away promising to recall Dion and asking that Plato not speak ill of him. So ended Plato's second expedition. The situation remained complex. Dionysius continued to avow his philosophic interests. Plato himself said that "among other natural qualifications that would make him a capable student, [he] is extremely ambitious to excel." (338d) Plato had to tread carefully; in his anger Dionysius could do great harm to Dion and to his family, who remained behind in Syracuse, but the faint possibility remained that Dionysius could still be "turned" to philosophy and do some good. But doubtless prudence and danger weighed most. Dion came to Athens and stayed at the Academy, where Plato tried to soften Dion's austere temper "with an occasional mixture of seasonable mirth." Dion traveled throughout Greece and received many public honors, especially the rare distinction of being made both an honorary citizen of Athens and also of Sparta, who must have recognized in him a kindred spirit.

All this must have been galling to Dionysius, who then cut off Dion's revenues, on the excuse that they really were the property of his son, leaving him in financial straits. At the same time, Dionysius complained that he needed more philosophical instruction and got Archytas to stand surety for his pressing invitation for Plato to return yet again. His letter to Plato intimated that, if not, it would go ill for Dion. Archytas and other friends wrote to praise Dionysius's devotion to philosophy and to warn that, if Plato did not come, the friendly relations between Dionysius and the Italian Pythagoreans would be broken, with unpleasant political consequences to follow. Dion's family also wrote to the same effect.

So once again Plato went, now sixty-eight years old, this time quoting the line from the *Odyssey* (12.428) describing Odysseus's third and final passage through the perils of Scylla and Charybdis, long associated with the narrow Straits of Messina that separates Italy from Sicily, "bringing to my spirit grief that I must measure the whole way back to Charybdis." (345e) As with many of Plato's quotations, this one is profoundly indicative. Plato is Odysseus, forced to return yet again to Sicily, which for both of them involves an impossible passage between two different perils, costing each time the lives of many companions. Yet this third time promises an end, for in the whirlpool of Charybdis Odysseus manages to hang on to a tall fig tree and then paddle out of sight of Scylla. So too might Plato and his friends escape destruction; perhaps Plato mused on the strange similarity between the names Ortygia, the tyrant's island fortress at Syracuse, and Ogygia, the island home of Calypso, Odysseus's next stop on his journey.

In the event, Plato, like Odysseus, found himself once again a captive in a gilded cage, longing for home. At first he was gratefully received, not least by the Syracusans who kept hoping that this time the tyranny would be lifted. Plato gave Dionysius what has come to be called the "prince's test": if someone professes an intense interest in philosophy, recount to them at length the great difficulties and many studies that it requires. If then the prince is eager to take up these challenges, you know his interest is

genuine. Evidently Dionysius failed this test, though it seems he late wrote some kind of book about the deepest truth of philosophy. In his letters, Plato tells this with a certain derision, holding that such truth can be found in no book. "I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining." (341c-d) Here, I think he is describing not so much the transmission of a secret doctrine but rather the process of conversation between kindred spirits.

Dionysius then offered an arrangement whereby Plato would stand surety for Dion's good behavior and his revenues be restored. This was a strategem to make Plato stay on; though he realized this, Plato felt he had to stay on to try to see the matter through, if there was even a slight hope of working things out. So he stayed on and he and Dionysius pretended to be friends, "I looking out like a bird that wants to fly away, he engaged in devising a way of frightening me off without paying me any of Dion's money." (348a) But the situation deteriorated as Dionysius showed that he really meant to be bound by no agreements, though Plato very directly remonstrated with him. Finally, Plato found himself housed among the tyrant's mercenaries, who despised and threatened him because they thought (rightly) that he was trying to persuade the ruler to do without them. Fearing imminent assassination, Plato contacted Archytas, who sent a galley from Tarentum and managed to get Plato released. Though Dionysius offered him travelling money, none of Dion's money was restored. As they parted, Plutarch says that Dionysius offered Plato great entertainments and signs of favor but could not help saying "No doubt, Plato, when you are at home among the philosophers, your companions, you will complain of me, and reckon up a great many of my faults." To which Plato answered with a smile, "The Academy will never, I trust, be at such a loss for subjects to discuss as to seek one in you."

Plutarch includes one other signal outrage. After Plato's departure, Dionysius forced Dion's wife, who had remained in Syracuse, to marry one of his favorites against her will, for there was a report (whether true or no) that his marriage was not pleasing to him. Dion next met Plato at the Olympic games (360), at which he was no stranger, for he had wrestled at the Istmian Games as a youth. ("Plato" was a nickname connoting his broad build ("Hulk"?), probably coined in the gymnasium, while his given name was Aristocles, son of Ariston, an aristocratic name if there ever was one.) Finally, the reserved Dion was roused to rage and vowed to return to Syracuse as a warrior to reclaim his own. Plato would have nothing to do with this; he was too old and moreover bound by the ancient restraint imposed by his guest-friendship with Dionysius. Was this an unworthy excuse? Should Plato have set aside his strictures against revolution and actively approved Dion's plan? Indeed, his nephew Speusippus and many others in the Academy strongly encouraged Dion and assisted him to liberate Sicily.

What followed was a drama worthy of Shakespeare, who drew so many plots from Plutarch. Dion arrived on Sicily in 357 with five vessels and eight hundred men,

including his Athenian friend Callippus and several from the Academy, a ridiculously small force to overthrow a tyranny entrenched for fifty years and commanding four hundred war ships, ten thousand horses, and a hundred thousand foot soldiers. Aristotle records that Dion said that even if he died immediately after setting foot on Sicily, it was glory enough to have died in such a cause.[5]

Even more amazingly, he succeeded against these overwhelming odds. Making landfall at a place controlled by the Carthaginians but commanded by a personal friend of his, Dion pressed on to Syracuse, from which Dionysius then happened to be absent, having sailed to Italy to reinforce his fleet under Philistus's command. By then, Dion's forces were joined by sympathizers and numbered five thousand; he entered Syracuse unresisted. Dion quickly became master of the whole city, except the Ortygia, the rocky islet on which the tyrant's forces remained ensconced. He told the assembly that, after fifty years, the day of freedom had arrived; with rapturous enthusiasm they honored him "as a god" and elected him and his brother Megacles each general with full powers, *strategos autokrator,* Dionysius's old title. They barricaded the land approach to the Ortygia so that when Dionysius returned a week later he ruled only over that fortress.

But the struggle had barely begun. Feigning to offer peace, Dionysius suddenly tried to break through the barricade; again Dion's bravery and strategy saved the day. Though Dionysius was still superior at sea, at this point another Syracusan political exile named Heraclides appeared from the Peloponnese with thirty ships and managed to defeat Dionysius's forces and kill Philistus, his most able supporter. Plutarch tells that Heraclides had met with Dion earlier, in exile, but they had fallen out and each determined to lead a separate expedition against Syracuse. After his notable sea victory, Heraclides became a rival to Dion for popular favor, which he did not scruple to court. Dion remained his old austere self; moreover, he was a part of the old dynasty by birth and thus suspected by the democrats of harboring the plan to take the throne himself. The name *Dion* is, after all, a short form of *Dionysius.* Heraclides did everything he could to arouse these suspicions and proposed redistribution of property and other radical measures that Dion opposed.

The next summer, the assembly included Heraclides among the twenty-five new generals but pointedly omitted Dion, who withdrew with his mercenaries, pursued by attacking Syracusans. But Dionysius was still alive and active, though he had left the Ortygia under the command of his son. From Italy, he sent a fleet that overwhelmed the city's defenses. In its peril, the city sent envoys to Dion begging his help; magnanimously, he came to its rescue and succeeded in driving out the invaders. Again he was hailed as their deliverer and their god; Heraclides knelt before him and begged for his life. Though his soldiers asked for his death and Dion's friends advised him to execute him not simply in revenge but "to root out of the commonwealth the ambitious affectation of popularity, a disease as pestilent and pernicious as the passion for tyranny itself." But once again Dion chose magnanimity, saying that "he had long studied in the Academy how to conquer anger, and not let emulation and envy conquer him; that to do this it is not sufficient that a man be obliging and kind to his friends, and those that have deserved well of him, but, rather, gentle and ready to forgive in the case of those who do

wrong; that he wished to let the world see that he valued not himself so much upon excelling Heraclides in ability and conduct, as he did in outdoing him in justice and clemncy." Dion even gave way to the mob of sailors that wanted Heraclides to continue as admiral.

Despite Dion's clemency, Heraclides continued to plot, now with Dionysius himself in exile. His plots being made known, Dion once again had grounds to kill him but again forebore and chose reconciliation. At this point, Dionysius's son, still walled up in the Ortygia, decided to give up and the whole city was at last Dion's. At last his wife was restored to him. He continued to live austerely; "he seemed as if he rather commoned with Plato in the Academy than lived among hired captains and paid soldiers." Now, as Plutarch says Plato wrote him, the eyes of the world were on him. Dion now had the power to enact the philosophic regime. But Heraclides remained active and plotting, despite all his oaths and promises of good behavior; finally Dion acceded to the advice to have him killed, which he had resisted so many times before. But Heraclides was killed in his own house, rather than in public and at a moment of popular anger against him; his death accordingly was resented by the people, despite the grand funeral Dion gave him and his address explaining his reasons.

Nor was Dion now free of care. His Athenian friend Callippus (whom Plutarch notes as a friend from the mysteries "and in the way of ordinary society," not from the Academy, began to intrigue privately to seize supreme power himself. He pretended to inform Dion of the plots others were planning as a cover for his own schemes. Dion himself was troubled by what he had done; he had a waking vision of a tall women, resembling a "tragical Fury," sweeping the floor. Greatly alarmed, he called for others to keep him company lest the vision return. Plutarch, who pairs Dion with Marcus Brutus, notes carefully the strange resemblance between this dark dream and Brutus's on the eve of the Battle of Philippi, familiar in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The vision did not return but a few days later Dion's son "upon a childish and frivolous occasion, threw himself headlong from the top of the house and broke his neck."

Now Callippus pressed his conspiracy to its end, spreading rumors that the now childless Dion was treating with Dionysius's son to be his successor. Dion and his wife began to suspect, but Callippus in all solemnity swore the Great Oath with tears in his eyes. Plutarch says that, with all his griefs hanging on him, Dion would have rather died "a thousand times, and open his breast himself to his assassin, than live not only in fear of his enemies but suspicion of his friends." He did not have to live long; hired assassins surrounded his house, tried to strangle or crush him, did not succeed, and finally got a knife passed to them, so that at length "like a victim at a sacrifice, this long time in their power and trembling for the blow, they killed him."

Plutarch somberly observes of Athens "that the good men she breeds are the most excellent, and the bad the most notorious; as their country also produces the most delicious honey and the most deadly hemlock." Callippus's triumph was brief; he left Syracuse to conquer other cities, but finally all the cities in Sicily rejected him and he was killed in Italy with the same sword that slew Dion, it is said. Dionysius then returned and seized power again. Once again the Carthaginians invaded. Ten years after

Dion's death, the Syracusans invited a Corinthian named Timoleon, who set up a limited democracy that lasted two decades. The person who eventually changed the larger situation was born the year of Dion's victory: Alexander of Macedon.

I leave you with many questions and no answers. How should we view Plato's actions and, even more, those of his best student? Are the terms triumph or tragedy of any help? If, as Plato himself suggests, the whole story was a test, the greatest possible test of his vision of philosophy ruling the world, and of himself and Dion personally, what was the result? At the funeral of Dion, the citizens of Syracuse paid him the honors due to a hero, a term which then had a special weight, not simply accorded to any brave person, for it meant someone of almost divine stature, of more than human accomplishment and merit. It is hard to deny him such an accolade but there are so many moments about which I wonder. Did he make a crucial mistake in pardoning Heraclides, a mistake he several times compounded? Was he then wrong to kill him in the end? Or is it wrong of us to blame his extraordinary clemency and generosity, motivated by the highest philosophical aspirations? For myself, I cannot help thinking that a certain admixture of Machiavellian *Realpolitik* might not only have saved Dion but, even more, saved his city and his cause. Is this an unworthy thought? How can the claims of the ideal be reconciled with the terrible realities of human life?

Though Plato continued to advise Dion's followers, one wonders about what he most deeply thought. Plato was a great poet who turned his poetry towards the dialogues we have, but he did leave a few outstanding poems, including one said to have been inscribed on Dion's tomb:

> Tears were for Hekabê, friend, and for Ilion's women,
> Spun into the dark Web on the day of their birth,
> But for you our hopes were great, and great the triumph,
> Cancelled alike by the gods at the point of glory.
> Now you lie in your own land, now all men honor you---
> But I loved you, O Dion!

More than Dion's great deeds and honor, Plato recalls his intense love. By using the charged term *eros*, he records the depth of his passion. Had his love illuminated or blinded him? Had he kept faith with Dion? He had writted that "Now was the time for the trial. If I were to convince but one man, that in itself would ensure complete success." (328c) Was Dion that one man, that complete success?

Sources

Quotations from Plato are from his *Letters*, unless otherwise identified; the translation of his epitaph for Dion is by Dudley Fitts.

Other unidentified quotes are from Plutarch's *Life of Dion*, as translated by John Dryden. For the continuation of the story of Syracuse immediately after the death of Dion, see his *Life of Timoleon*.

Among other ancient historians (most of whom are now lost), see Diodorus of Sicily (Siculus), *History* XV.6-7 (Dionysius I as poet; story of Philoxenus; story of Dionysius I and Plato), XVI.5-6 (Dionysius II and Dion), 9-15 (Dion defeats Dionysius II).

Notes

---

[1] This is the approach of Ludwig Marcuse, *Plato and Dionysius: A Double Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1947). In what follows, I have relied on the historical survey in *Plato's Epistles*, ed. Glenn R. Morrow (Indianapolis, IN: Library of Liberal Arts, 1962), pp. 145-155, whose historical and critical essays I found very valuable, especially concerning the vexed questions of the authenticity of the *Letters*.

[2] Diodorus Siculus, *History*, XV.6.

[3] Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Plato* 18-19.

[4] Herodotus, *History* 1.24-25.

[5] *Politics* 1312a35. One of the lost dialogues of Aristotle, the *Eudemus*, was written to commemorate a member of the Academy who died in the fighting.