

On Plato

Thomas Rayfiel

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I can't follow a logical argument. *If a, then b* seems like a wild stretch. I can conceive of a thing and its opposite. Full stop. That, to me, is reality.

Why, then, did I start writing a novel about a philosopher? Maybe my sheer ignorance was inviting. I am not someone who tries to repackage his life as story. My motto is: Write what you no. (Of course it always ends up being searingly autobiographical, but without bearing, it is hoped, the leaden touch of intention.) This state of self-deception extends to the research phase as well. One day I picked up *The Republic* as I would the latest highbrow best-seller, curious to see what all the fuss was about. I was surprised to find that the most famous part, about the cave, pretty much exists as a digression. It is surrounded by a lot of instructions for the establishment of a utopian community which read, as these programs always do, like the musings of a crackpot. Then there is a radical coming-into-focus as Plato startlingly depicts what is still the template for so much of our (Western) lives. Yet the whole idea of making one's way towards the Good unsettled me. I sensed it worked against what I do. I'm not talking about the puerile chapter in which he argues for expelling poetry, but his implication that you should reject your "dark" side. Surely that is where art comes from, in part. In large part.

My friend Arthur disagreed.

"I love *The Republic*," he sighed. "I remember having an almost mystical feeling as I tracked the philosopher upward, out of the cave and into the light. I understood his reluctance to ever again live in darkness and illusion."

"But why equate those two, darkness and illusion?" I argued. "They don't seem like an obvious pairing to me. Why not go deeper into the cave? Explore the mystery?"

He closed his eyes and smiled.

"It was revolutionary at the time, the thought of imprisonment as our default condition. The idea of life as a sort of garment we put on, after which we discover what it is to actually live it, that the life we lead is something we have chosen, that the responsibility is ours..." He shook his head, savoring its implications. "As for your objection to his wanting to ban poets, have you read the *Iliad* recently? It claims our lives are imposed on us by gods and fate. Our only option is to make the best of it. That's what Plato was up against. His problem was to make

philosophy a better educational tool than poetry.”

This interested me because Arthur had been both artist and philosopher. A moderately successful visual artist in the 1950s, he had maintained a second career (I know this sounds absurd, now) in philosophy. One night, working in his studio, he had a revelation: he would rather be writing a philosophical treatise than making art. He immediately gave up that part of his life and devoted himself exclusively to understanding the world through knowledge. It worked, for him. He gained fame, to a degree I don't think he ever would have in art and, more importantly, was happy, utterly engaged not just in his writing and teaching but in his life. I'm always intrigued by people who make a choice, a conscious decision, about their future, and then carry it out. It's as alien to me as following a chain of thought.

I worked on the novel. One of the many short-term motivations I used to keep me going was the anticipatory thrill of sitting down with Arthur and having him correct my more egregious errors. He was fun to be with, always open to the new, and effortlessly, charmingly instructive. We would have a good time. I would learn.

Sadly, when I finally got to the end of the first draft, Arthur, then in his eighties, had reached a point of only intermittently noticing the world around him. He was still alert and optimistic but for hours at a time existed elsewhere. I went to see him. I didn't bother to take the manuscript. Instead I brought a bottle of wine. I poured us each a glass and put one in Arthur's hand. He looked at it questioningly. I raised mine to my lips, encouraging him to do the same. He mimicked my action and took a sip. A beatific smile spread across his face.

“I don't know what this is,” he said—which I took to mean what any of this was, the glass, the wine, the world—“but it's *fantastic*.”

That is how I leave him, in my mind, climbing out of the cave, taking those final steps, freed from the last shreds of illusion, into the light. Or rather that is how he leaves me. For I am still here, where shadows flicker on the wall and, beyond them, an even deeper darkness beckons.

Thomas Rayfiel is the author, most recently, of the novel Genius, which Kirkus Review called "morbidly funny." He lives in Brooklyn.

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