

A page of handwritten musical notation on ten staves. The notation is dense and appears to be a complex piece of music, possibly for a string ensemble or chamber group. The handwriting is in black ink on a light-colored paper. The staves are numbered 1 through 10 from top to bottom. The music includes various note values, rests, and bar lines. The overall appearance is that of a working draft or a composer's sketch.

Notes to the Teacher

POETRY, PLATO, AND THE PROBLEM OF TRUTH

The aim of *Poetry, Plato, and the Problem of Truth*, as in the volume about beauty that preceded it, is to bring three components of intellectual content to a mutual focus, creating a rigorous academic experience.

POETICS

This book is both a stand-alone text and the culmination of a six-volume series. It works equally well in both contexts. It is the most advanced and complete treatment of poetics in the series, and features more mature poems as well as more full-length poems. It also goes into far more detail than any previous volume, particularly in the area of rhyme and other sound devices. I have gone to some length to help students escape the myth that poetry is a loose, common, undisciplined effusion of emotion; that view is an insult to poets as artists, and a catastrophic intellectual error. Great poetry is very high art, not unlike Mozart writing sheet music note by note with separate lines for each instrument.

TRUTH

Research confirms that students benefit when rigorous academic content is developed within the framework of an organizing abstract concept. In this case, the concept of truth is used to integrate the questions, terms, and examples of the book into a whole, with the Socratic purpose of exploring the concept to see what can be learned. In fact, truth is an exceptionally challenging concept; it is one of those terms that is so common as to seem obvious, and yet challenges to the certainty of most so-called truths are so disrupting that the chill of uncertainty rapidly begins to draft through the cracks. Our assumptions are hampered by limitations in our sensory apparatus, by deep-felt preferences that bias our confidence and make serious questioning repulsive, by mass myths and stereotypes that have been repeated around us since we were born. There is a massive paradox at the core of the concept of truth: on the one hand, it is amazing what we know; in the last century academic disciplines have worked miracles in the accumulation of knowledge.

On the other hand, it is amazing what we do not know. In every field, towering questions loom over scholarship, and new research continually discovers new questions as newly discovered truths make possible questions that could not have been framed before. After two thousand years of scholarship, scholars have never been more on the edge of their seats, staring into the expanding mystery, than they are now. Today we know more about the mystery than we ever have before. Poetry and truth have much to do with each other: poets explore truth and articulate truth, and some poems are truths unto themselves, as unique masterpieces of art. Poets are among those thinkers most aware of the perils of feeling certain.

PLATO

If we are going to explore a concept in elaborate depth, as we do in this book, there is no better intellectual spice to throw into the mixture than the approach of Plato. Plato is the single most influential thinker in intellectual history, and there is good reason that this is so. From Plato the western world acquired its ceaseless inquiry, its standpoint of stubborn open-ended dialogue. Plato is the antithesis of dogma, the apotheosis of the open mind. Not from Plato will we receive quick answers through our window, and then drive away. Plato means think, think, think. And then, if you still aren't sure, say you don't know.

It is the insistence on truth that Plato established as the standard of validity, and this insistence—even if it means that the truth is that we don't know—now permeates all of our intellectual endeavors at their best.

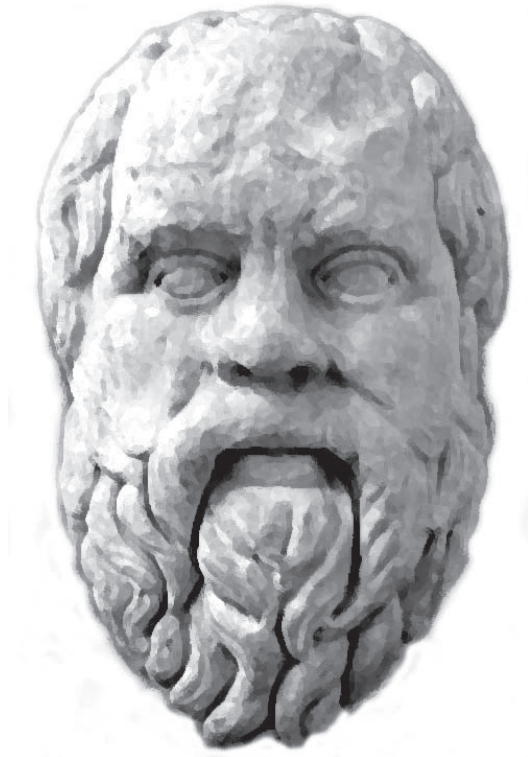
The attitude of this book is Socratic, which is another word to describe the philosophy of Plato. The book proposes a great number of open-ended discussions, with no preference for what the answer might be. There is no hidden agenda, only an enthusiasm for discussing what truth is and whether any of its properties can be distinguished. As is the case in many programs that feature Socratic thinking, the plan is that after reading and studying, we open a question for student discussion, with the teacher being a fair moderator. At no point should the teacher begin steering students toward a supposed right answer; in fact, the questions relating to truth are so challenging that they defy the simplistic idea of a “right answer.” With any luck,

the outcome of a discussion will be that some students feel persuaded of one possibility, while others are leaning toward another; this is perfect, since that divided situation inherently galvanizes students to keep thinking, to think with greater intensity, and to take the question more seriously.

In this text I have relied primarily upon Plato's *Apology*. If you and your students are interested in reading one of Plato's *Dialogues*, this is the one that I would recommend for the purpose. There are a number of factors that make other choices less appropriate, but the *Apology* is an outstanding introduction to the philosophy of Plato. It is the first one to read.

I am convinced that poetry must be one of the core components of advanced formal language study. In our effort to clarify, we have intellectually separated poetry from prose, but most great prose writers also wrote poetry and used those techniques in their novels, so that if we do not have the background to notice those novelistic techniques, we are missing something important. Furthermore, ordinary excellent prose makes more use of poetic technique than may be supposed.

Good writers alter sentences for meter, alliterate adjectives and nouns, and change words to alter the tone of the sounds. Abraham Lincoln made extensive use of his poetic training when he wrote the Gettysburg Address. Also, poetry is of first importance as a model of complex thought; students need to experience high complexity (chess is an example), and poetics raises the bar to an extreme. At its finest, poetry is so complex that students may have difficulty believing that poets really know they are doing these things. From an educational standpoint, it is important for students to be familiar with famous poems and famous poets; this is an area of expected knowledge that educated people have in common. And finally, poetry is a high calling in the search for truth; poets, as Whitman said, do not just write these things to fill up the time while they wait for boats. Poetry is utterly serious, and many of the most powerful works of literary art in history were poems.



CONDUCTING SOCRATIC DISCUSSIONS

Since *Poetry, Plato, and the Problem of Truth* incorporates open-ended questions so extensively, it is worthwhile to delineate the elements of Socratic discussions. Even though these types of questions should be the most exciting of all for students, it is possible to go awry, and to conduct a discussion in a way that may seem to be, but is not actually, Socratic.

Every true Socratic discussion must be grounded in the Socratic paradox, sometimes called the Socratic wisdom: I know that I know nothing. What this means, as the greatest thinkers of history have almost unanimously confirmed, is that the world is a most perplexing place. The great questions that absorbed the attention of the first philosophers (What is justice, what is truth, what is beauty...) still do not have decisive answers. Just imagine what it would mean to the world if we understood things like justice, love, and hate enough that we could end war, end divorce, end the problems that divide humanity from itself. But millennia after Plato's death, we still do not have the answers to Plato's questions.

What we do have is his wisdom: that the pursuit of truth gives meaning to life, that perplexity is real, that an honest admission of ignorance is starkly superior to the shallow pretense of knowing. Exploration and integrity.

The implication of this wisdom for the classroom is that in our curricula we do not stop with verifiable facts; we move through what is (apparently) known, on to what we *think* we know, and on into what we still do *not* know.

For any of the open-ended questions in this text, a proper procedure for the teacher would be something like:

- 1) Have the class read the appropriate text carefully.
- 2) Review the supporting details and terms together.
- 3) Read the open-ended question together for the first time.
- 4) Give students, either alone or in very small groups, time to reflect.
- 5) Have students write down their preliminary hypotheses or reflections.
- 6) Discuss the question as a whole group, letting students present their thoughts.
- 7) The teacher moderates but maintains permanent neutrality in the discussion.

The key is that the teacher does not have a personal position in the discussion. If the teacher privately views one answer as right, and begins to steer the students to that conclusion, the Socratic openness is lost, and “wrong” students will begin to lose their unencumbered enjoyment of the discussion. The teacher must simply appreciate all of the angles, let the discussion go where it will, and probe for clarification from everyone. The teacher must also establish the rules before the discussion, making sure that everyone understands that all suggestions and views will be respectfully received, and no ridicule or negative behavior will be allowed. During the discussion, the teacher monitors this affective element, and leads the way in welcoming and appreciating all views.

What if the discussion ends with the students sharply divided?

Good.

Once, we were discussing whether, in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa was really a bug or not. Half the class thought so, the rest not. Students were citing the text to make their cases. Finally, I had students change seats; if you think Gregor is a bug, sit on this side... If you become persuaded that the other side is right, get up and move. We kept debating. Once in a while, a student would get this startled look, look at me, and get up and move to the other side.

After two days, I still had a divided class. I told them that the question would be on their final exam, and that by then they had better have a good argument to make. I got wonderful essays on the exam.

Socratic discussions don't just *seem* ("Nay, madam," said Hamlet, "I know not seems.") to be open-ended, with the teacher finally guiding students to what was all along the right answer. Socratic discussions truly are open-ended. They often stay open-ended. They tend to be deep questions, and to be just as open at the end of the discussion as they were at the beginning. They are, in fact, Socratic.

THINGS TO TALK ABOUT AND THINK ABOUT

Many of these questions are open-ended, Socratic questions.

Sound

1. What is the most interesting thing you have learned about the use of vowels and consonants in poetry?
2. What have you learned about rhyme that you did not know before?
3. Other than rhyme, what do you think is the most intriguing sound technique?
4. How would you design a poem to sound like the wind?

Meter

1. What is the most important thing you have learned about meter?
2. Is the rising meter/falling meter distinction important to know? Why?
3. Could you write an entire poem of pyrrhics?
4. Why do you think more poems are not written in dactyls or anapests?

Stanza

1. Has our work with stanzas changed what you thought about poetry?
2. What stanza form would you most like to experiment with?
3. Is the design of an English sonnet beautiful? Why? What are the strengths of the English sonnet?
4. How would you describe the essence of the English, Italian, and Spenserian sonnets? What might cause you to use one of them over the other two?

Figures of Speech

1. Do figures of speech make communication clearer or more ambiguous?
2. Which figures of speech do you think demand the most creativity of the poet?
3. If someone said figures of speech should be abolished, what would you reply?
4. What are the qualities that make a figure of speech great and memorable?

THINGS FOR STUDENTS TO DO

Sound

1. Write a short dialogue between two characters. Each one must use unique vowels and consonants and must avoid those used by the other character.
2. Write two ballad stanzas. They can have no words at all. The entire poem must be composed of sound effects like *splooosh* or *bonk*. Only the titles of the poems can be made of words, to announce what the sounds are really about. The ballad stanzas must be perfect in form and meter.

Meter

1. Write a short poem in which the meter captures the sound of a train. You may need to shift meter or combine meters.
2. Write a poem of two stanzas using falling meter. Make sure that the falling meter is right for the subject of the poem.

Stanza

1. Write a ballad about someone trying to write a sonnet. You may use as many ballad stanzas as you like.
2. Invent a new stanza of eight lines or fewer. Name the stanza and write an example.

Figures of Speech

1. Show how different figures of speech could help communicate an extreme emotion, such as panic or great enthusiasm. Brainstorm a list of at least five examples.
2. Write a short essay discussing when you think figures of speech are most appropriate in poems, and when you think they are least appropriate.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. The stopped consonants are:
 - a. mn rs
 - b. pb td kg
 - c. zs fj
 - d. hs f th
2. The words *spoon* and *Spain* are examples of:
 - a. end rhyme
 - b. eye-rhyme
 - c. alliteration
 - d. apophany
3. The two words *snoop* and *snooze* are an example of:
 - a. apophany
 - b. amphisbaenic rhyme
 - c. reverse rhyme
 - d. beginning rhyme
4. When we begin words with the same sound, like *tomato*, *team*, and *tarp*, that is:
 - a. eye-rhyme
 - b. alliteration
 - c. onomatopoeia
 - d. end rhyme
5. A line of iambic trimeter has:
 - a. one foot
 - b. four feet
 - c. three feet
 - d. five feet
6. The words *Adam* **and** *had 'em* are an example of:
 - a. mosaic rhyme
 - b. reverse rhyme
 - c. onomatopoeia
 - d. eye-rhyme
7. A trochee has:
 - a. two unstressed syllables
 - b. two stressed syllables
 - c. the first syllable stressed
 - d. the second syllable unstressed
8. The words *suddenly* **and** *multitude* are examples of:
 - a. iambs
 - b. dactyls
 - c. trochees
 - d. anapests