POETRY, Plato, and the Problem of Truth

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Royal Fireworks Press
How you feel, O men of Athens, after hearing these speeches of my accusers, I do not know; but I know that their convincing words almost made me forget who I am—such was the effect of them; and yet they have hardly spoken a word of truth.

- Plato, Apology
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Chaerephon asked the oracle of Apollo at Delphi to tell him if there was anyone wiser than I, and the Pythian prophetess said that there was no man wiser. When I heard this, I said to myself, “What does the oracle mean? What is the interpretation of this riddle? I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What can this mean that I am the wisest of men?”

- Plato, Apology
POETRY, PLATO, AND THE PROBLEM OF TRUTH

This is a book about poetry, but what is poetry about? Is poetry about truth? Let’s consider...

Human beings are the species of ideas. We do not live on this planet merely by reacting to its physical stimuli and pursuing our senses of taste and smell: we think. In human history’s earliest scenes, people are making myths, expressing reverence, constructing philosophies, and arranging abstractions to bring the chaotic diversity of nature into understandable form. These myths, religions, philosophies, mathematics systems, and abstract vocabularies of all kinds are new to the planet; together they form a vast collection of ideas that we created, that we added to the Earth story. In a sense, if humanity were to vanish, then all ideas too would vanish—switch off like city lights in a blackout, though the underlying realities, if there to begin with, would continue to exist. The ocean would roll to the shore, but our idea of its being beautiful would be gone.

Ideas are the human dimension. For us, surviving on our planet is not enough; we want to comprehend it.

TRUTH
Of all the ideas that we have made, the most important—and the most challenging—may be the idea of truth. At first glance, it may not even seem that truth is an idea. After all, some things are true, aren’t they, whether we think so or not? Whether we wish them to be true or not? Isn’t truth independent of human control? Isn’t truth...true?
These are good questions, but that is what they are: questions.

On the one hand, we want to say that the world is round, though every voice proclaim it flat. We want to say that the sky is blue; you could call it green, but you would be wrong. We want to say that things fall down, not up, and that’s a fact. We want to say that there are thousands or even millions of things that are true, obviously true, and that there can be no doubt about these things. To doubt them would be frivolous. We live in a surrounding context of obvious and reassuring truths. Anyone can see that.

On the other hand, we must admit that there have been times in our lives when we have felt such absolute certainty, but later discovered that we had been wrong. Our powerful sense of certainty was a deception. Sometimes our memories of events have been inaccurate, our calculations have been incorrect, our eyes have been deceived. We have misjudged the good intent of someone’s words. We have switched facts in our minds. We have gotten mixed up, without even knowing it. Sometimes we have believed false things true, just because we wanted so much for them to be true. To be certain something is true does not make it true. Anyone can see that.

This shifting ground between our certainty of truth and our awareness of the unknown has been a pervasive element of human existence, both within ourselves and among ourselves, for thousands of years.
Socrates: It seems that I am wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know.

- Plato, Apology
Of course, it is not only ordinary individuals who have changed their minds and contradicted one another; it is also leading thinkers, scientists, and artists. In the centuries—and even millennia—since the first civilizations, theories of the universe have come and gone. Great poets, playwrights, and novelists have presented alternative ideas about human nature. New theories of matter have replaced old theories, one following another. Newton’s magnificent and once unshakable theory of physics has been supplanted by Einstein’s theory of relativity, and we begin to see the edges of new and even stranger theories approaching.

With each generation, new discoveries have brought new ideas about what is true. Our sense of reality has evolved with our experience. Once it seemed simple and obvious that objects fall down. Today, with photographs from space showing both the Earth and Moon bathed in the same sunlight, we can see that the word down does not mean what we thought. If two people on opposite sides of the earth both dropped objects at the same time, the objects would fall toward each other, toward the center of the earth—the two people would be standing, compared to each other, upside down, and the two objects would be falling up.

The universe seems to be good at concealing the truth, or at deceiving us by showing only part of the truth. We are often blinded by local vision. What time is it? In a photograph of the Earth from space, we can see, in the same photograph, both sunrise and sunset, both midnight and noon, all times at the same time; what time it is depends on where you are. Time is place. It is always all times. Half of the planet is always in the sun; noon is the center point of the light, and the planet spins the continents through the noon point.

We begin to get a feeling for what the German poet Goethe meant when he said that, “Doubt increases with knowledge.”
Socrates: Whenever I succeed in disproving another person’s claim to wisdom in a given subject, the bystanders assume that I know everything about that subject myself.

- Plato, *Apology*
The more we learn, the more we ask. The more details we see, the more we also see the gaps, the contradictions, the ambiguities. New facts lead to new questions. Education frees us from ignorant stereotypes and popular myths, but leads us to the frontiers of knowledge and exposes false claims.

Yes, Goethe said that doubt increases with knowledge, but notice that this does not mean that knowledge decreases. It is a paradox, meaning not that we gradually know less, but that as we know more, we learn enough to doubt more things, and those doubts are more intense.

We read one biography of Alexander the Great; he seems like a hero and a military genius. We read a second biography of Alexander, and he seems to be a brutal conqueror who annihilated anyone who stood in his way. We read a third, and we find a sensitive Alexander full of psychological complexity and intricate family problems. The biographies confirm some details, but contradict others. Do we know the truth about Alexander?

Truth?

What do we really mean by the word truth, and where did our concept of truth come from?
PLATO
Our concept of truth first originated in a past more ancient than history can reveal, but we could say that the modern western idea of truth was developed and articulated by Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher who founded a school, the Academy, in Athens. Born in 427 B.C., Plato was a pupil of Socrates (470-399 B.C.), the gadfly philosopher who publicly exposed the false wisdom of the Sophists and other self-proclaimed experts in ancient Athens. Socrates was charged with corrupting the youth and believing in false gods, was found guilty of those charges, and chose to drink hemlock, a bitter poison, rather than to leave Athens. Socrates explained to the jury that he did not know it would be an evil to die, but he felt sure it would be an evil to leave Athens. Later, when Socrates’s friends tried to help him escape from jail, he refused, saying that one must respect the laws of a civilization.

Young Plato was deeply affected by Socrates’s fate, and Plato decided to pursue a quiet life of scholarship and thought; it was safer that way. In time, Plato became the teacher of Aristotle, who became the teacher of Alexander the Great, who conquered most of the world known to the Greeks, and spread the Greek language and culture across Persia all the way to India. In large part because of Alexander’s military genius, the wisdom of Socrates and Plato has survived to become the philosophical foundation of modern western thought.

Socrates never put his ideas in writing, but Plato wrote one of intellectual history’s supreme works: the Dialogues. Plato’s Dialogues are like a series of brainy, poetic plays, in which Socrates is a character, having conversations with various individuals about important ideas. Typically, the discussion ends in perplexity, with the embarrassed other individual admitting that he did not know as much as he had thought. We believe that these dialogues give us our most accurate portrait of the real Socrates, a dangerously brilliant thinker.
There are twenty-six of Plato’s Dialogues (all have survived), but the most important for our discussion of poetry and truth is Apology, the dialogue about the trial of Socrates. This is also the best dialogue to read first because in his own defense Socrates tells the story of his life and explains how he began on his long quest for truth.

Socrates describes the day he learned that the oracle of Apollo at Delphi had called him the wisest man in Athens. He was shocked because he did not feel wise in any way—and yet the oracle could not be wrong. What could it mean? Socrates decided to begin seeking out persons famous for their wisdom, to discuss truths with them and learn from their knowledge. In time, Socrates realized that the experts’ so-called knowledge was full of inconsistencies and errors, and that they did not know any more than he did.

The difference was that they mistakenly thought they knew the truth, whereas Socrates realized his own ignorance. It was in this limited way that he was the wisest man in Athens. Socrates expressed his curious wisdom in a famous paradox:

I only know that I know nothing.
In ways that we seldom realize, this Socratic paradox has become the guide-star of enlightened, modern thought. The obvious example is science, which honestly says “I don’t know” until enough confirming evidence has finally accumulated to permit a mere hypothesis to be called a theory. (In contrast to the casual public use of the word, scientists do not call something a theory until it is regarded as proven.) Socrates’s I-know-that-I-do-not-know is the very opposite of superstition, the opposite of leaping to conclusions from fear or uneasiness, the opposite of all efforts to assert truth, rather than to prove it.

It is this flinty integrity, this refusal to say you know if you don’t—even if it means you must drink your hemlock—that keeps Socrates’s image in the center of authentic thought, after more than 2,000 years. Socrates would not budge, not pretend. “The truth is,” we seem to hear him say, “that I do not really know the answer, and neither do you.” Truth is truth.

In the two millennia since Socrates and Plato discussed ideas in the shadow of the Acropolis, humanity has explored the unknown in many ways. We have taken submersibles to the bottom of the sea, have hurtled across space to land on the moon, have cracked open mountain rocks to find marine fossils. We have pushed the limits of mathematics and built giant particle accelerators to explore the tiniest innards of atoms. We have peered through electron microscopes at the lenses of insects’ eyes and have dug through desert ruins in search of artifacts to capture dusty details of the ever-receding past.

But we have pursued the truth in other ways as well, through philosophy, through novels, through paintings and symphonies. Beethoven once said that for the person who understood his music, “all the problems of life would be solved.” Van Gogh and Picasso broke the traditions of art to paint new visions of the truth, to change vision itself.

And from the earliest civilization, human beings have used one special, complex form of art to explore the truth: poetry.
THE TRUTH OF POETRY
The notion that poems tell truth may seem, at first, unpersuasive. How can truth be pursued through the writing of poems? How can an idea in a poem be considered true? How would we know if anything in a poem is true or not? After all, poetry is not like science, where tested methods are used to confirm hypotheses.

The idea that poems reveal truth may initially seem dubious, but what if we suggested the alternative, that poems aren’t true, that poems distort reality? Poems are lies. Would that be more plausible? Probably not. It seems likely that many poems, particularly the great ones, express truth, and that this core of truth may be one of the reasons that great poems are great.

There is an interesting comparison to make: scientific hypotheses have to weather the test of time; they have to survive the scrutiny and replication of results of other scientists around the world. Hypotheses that cannot survive this intense examination do not become theories. Similarly, poems have to weather the test of time; they are closely studied by readers, students, college professors, literary critics, and other poets. They are the subjects of essays that examine their every detail. They are adopted or not adopted for poetry anthologies. Perhaps most importantly, the best ones are taken in by the lovers of poetry, and become part of the good content of an educated mind. The process that poems go through to become international knowledge is long, complex, and profound. It takes a poem through the hands of thousands of readers and lasts for years, or decades, or centuries.

It seems unlikely that a lie could survive, and that like the follow-up in science, the follow-up in poetry, though different, would weed out the pretenders, leaving the strongest poems.

And as we think more about this question of poetry and truth, we realize that poetry is not so different from other major art forms. Would we doubt the truth of music? Or painting?
Socrates: Please do not be offended if I tell you the truth.
- Plato, *Apology*
Would we doubt that music, art, architecture, and other creative endeavors are valuable to the pursuit of truth? Would we want to argue that science, mathematics, and history are about the truth, but the creative arts are only about the imagination and do not help us to know the real world? Does “imagined” mean false?

Few who know the creative arts well would want to make that case.

There are truths, for example, that would be difficult for a biographer to approach, but that a novelist could easily explore. A biographer might have to speculate about what a historical figure privately thought, but a novelist can go deep into a character’s mind. Each writer has a better opportunity to examine certain problems.

We think of fiction as false and of nonfiction as true, yet either genre can be true or not. There can be vicious and false biographies, and there can be creative stories, such as the *Iliad*, that are shockingly true-to-life. We must be alert for the frequent truth in fiction, and for the possible deceptions in nonfiction.

The modern American poet Wallace Stevens said that the poet recognizes the truth of a poem by feeling the “right sensation.” We know the feeling, that we have recognized truth when we have seen it, yet the “right sensation” does not seem convincing. My right sensation might suggest the opposite of yours. But is this really as different from science as it seems? At what point do scientists stop checking results? How do they know when enough is enough? Do they suddenly have the right sensation, and move on to other problems?
“Truth is so rare that it is delightful to tell it.”

- Emily Dickinson

THE WONDERFUL PROBLEM OF TRUTH
As we think more carefully about what truth is and how it can be recognized, we become aware of the dimensions of the problem; it appears as from a mist, and dim details emerge.

Truth is a problem in the best, most wonderful sense. It is important, it is a complex phenomenon that is a central part of all academic and creative fields, it has a popular, common, “known” feel to it, and yet it is extraordinarily elusive to define. It seems to have many dimensions. It is a major part of the sciences, and yet may be less provable than the idea of science would suggest. It is also a major part of the arts, and may be more central to the purpose of art than the idea of creativity or fiction would suggest.

There may be many ways of searching for the truth, including ways we have never thought about. And there may be many ways of confirming a truth, including ways we have never thought about.

There may be truths that cannot be proven, including some of the most important truths of all.
Socrates:
I hesitate to tell you the truth, but it must be told. - Plato,
*Apology*
Some of you will think that I am not being serious.
- Plato, *Apology*
She said her Strings were snapt—
Her Bow—to Atoms blown—
And so to mend her—gave me work
Until another Morn—

And then—a Day as huge
As Yesterdays in pairs,
Unrolled its horror in my face—
Until it blocked my eyes—

My Brain—begun to laugh—
I mumbled—like a fool—
And tho’ tis Years ago—that Day—
My Brain keeps giggling—still.

And Something’s odd—within—
That person that I was—
And this One—do not feel the same—
Could it be Madness—this?

In this poem about one of those overwhelming moments—
although Dickinson gives no clue what it was—we begin to see how all
of the poetics come together—the alternating ballad wave of iambic
tetrameter and iambic trimeter, the emphasis on half rhyme over rhyme
in the odd-numbered lines, the use of internal sounds such as bow
to emphasize end sounds such as blown, the piercing personification of the soul,
whose strings are snapped and whose bow is blown to atoms (note the two
cases of alliteration there). All of this, and more, leads to the final interrogative
stanza about a new and disturbing sense of self. It is a powerful
poem, ending in a note of Socratic perplexity...could I be mad? Could
this sense of the-person-I-am-is-not-the-person-I-was be madness?

What might Dickinson have written if she had been unaware of all formal technique?
What if she had not understood iambic meter, or assonance? What if she
had known nothing about alliteration, or the subtle use of half rhyme?
William Shakespeare used both personification and apostrophe in Sonnet XIX; he tells Time not to wreak the effects of age on his beloved, but says that even if it does happen, the beloved will be young forever in his poetry. The poem is a classic English sonnet, fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, ababcdcdefefgg.

Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion’s paws,
And make the earth devour her own sweet brood;
Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger’s jaws,
And burn the long-lived phoenix in her blood;
Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleets,
And do whate’er thou wilt, swift-footed Time,
To the wide world and all her fading sweets;
But I forbid thee one most heinous crime:
O, carve not with thy hours my love’s fair brow,
Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen;
Him in thy course untainted do allow
For beauty’s pattern to succeeding men.
Yet, do thy worst, old Time: despite thy wrong,
My love shall in my verse ever live young.
METONYMY and SYNECDOCHE
We have looked at metaphor, simile, personification, and apostrophe, but there are more figures of speech. In fact, there are far more than we will be able to discuss, but we can get to know the basic ones.

Metonymy is letting a single characteristic of something, or a related object, stand for the whole thing. A simple detail really means the whole complex. The most common examples are the White House to mean the executive branch of government, or the Crown to mean the authority of the royal family of England.

We say that the police are the law. We say, “The pen is mightier than the sword,” but we mean that the word is more powerful than military power. A sailor is an “old salt.” We say that we love the stage, meaning theater. The president sends a bill to “Capitol Hill”: the congress. The cattle rancher takes fifty head to market. A smart person is a brain, and a restaurant keeps a good table.

In The Great Gatsby, Scott Fitzgerald wrote, “Her voice is full of money.”

Synecdoche is a form of metonymy. If the simple thing that stands for the whole is a part of it, that is synecdoche. Common examples are tongue for speech, hands for workers, and blonde for a person with that color of hair. Calling a car your wheels is synecdoche. Robert Frost once called himself a “synecdochist.” Shakespeare used synecdoche in Act V, scene ii of Love’s Labour’s Lost, in a song that says the call of the cuckoo is an offense to a married man:

Cuckoo, cuckoo! O, word of fear, Unpleasing to a married ear!
FREE FOREHEADS

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, England. He began writing poetry as a teenager, imitating Lord Byron, and published his first solo collection in 1830. He was named Poet Laureate of England in 1850, succeeding William Wordsworth. Queen Victoria admired Tennyson and named him Baron Tennyson, of Aldworth in the county of Sussex and of Freshwater in the Isle of Wight. Tennyson thus became the first poet named to the Peerage. His book-length epic poem *Idylls of the King* explored the legend of Arthur. He is buried in the Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey.

Some of Tennyson’s poetry seems very remote from our time, and can be difficult to read. English language and literature have changed a great deal in a century. The American critic Dorothy Parker expressed her dislike of Tennyson in a humorous quatrain; she used a mosaic rhyme, *any son*, to rhyme with *Tennyson*:

Alfred, Lord Tennyson
Dorothy Parker

Should Heaven send me any son,
I hope he’s not like Tennyson.
I’d rather have him play a fiddle
Than rise and bow and speak an idyll.

After his best friend Arthur Hallam died, Tennyson plunged into reflection and wrote “Ulysses.” He said that “‘Ulysses’ was written soon after Arthur Hallam’s death, and gave my feeling about the need of going forward, and braving the struggle of life.” The sound of the poem has been described as desolate and melancholy, and today there is great difference of opinion among critics about the central meaning of the poem. Tennyson uses *Ulysses*, the name Virgil gave to Odysseus when he translated Homer’s *Odyssey*. In the poem, we see an aging Odysseus, dreaming of new adventures. The poem contains some of the best known lines in literature, and Tennyson used synecdoche in describing the mariners as “free foreheads.”
It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Matched with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
I cannot rest from travel; I will drink
life to the lees. All times I have enjoyed
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those
that loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
Through scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vexed the dim sea. I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known—cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honored of them all—
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end.
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
As though to breathe were life! Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains; but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, my own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the scepter and the isle—
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfill
This labor, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and through soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centered in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.
There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail;
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toiled, and wrought, and thought with me—
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honor and his toil.
Death closes all; but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;
The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends.
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
the sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;
It may be that we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are—
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.
MORE FIGURES OF SPEECH
Simile and metaphor, personification and apostrophe, and metonymy and synecdoche—these are some of the most common figures of speech, but there are many more. Let’s look at a few:

HYPERBOLE
Hyperbole (hi PURR bo lee) is extreme exaggeration for emphasis. When we say, “I’ve told you a million times...” we don’t mean literally a million; that’s just hyperbole. Hyperbole is the opposite of understatement.

PARADOX
A paradox is a true statement expressed as a contradiction, such as Socrates’s wisdom, “I only know that I know nothing.”

OXYMORON
Oxymoron is a paradoxical use of two terms that seem to contradict each other: cold war, almost exactly, constant change, intense apathy, alone together. John Donne wrote of “miserable abundance,” and Jonathan Swift used the oxymoron, “humbly bold.” In “The Second Coming,” Yeats wrote that a “terrible beauty” is born.

IRONY
In irony, the real meaning is concealed or even the opposite of what is said. When Han Solo says to Jabba the Hut, “Jabba, you’re a wonderful human being,” that is irony. There is a term, Socratic Irony, that refers to feigning ignorance in order to attack another’s weak argument, but by our view this is not what Socrates was doing; his recognition of perplexity was genuine. In Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Hamlet cries with reference to his murdered father: “O heavens! died two months ago and not forgotten yet? Then there’s hope a great man’s memory may outlive his life half a year.” In Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, Mark Antony repeats ironically that the assassins are “all honorable men.”

“Take thy face hence.”
Shakespeare, Macbeth V.iii.
LITOTES
Litotes is when we emphasize something by denying its contrary.
In *Beowulf* we read, “The edge was not useless to the warrior.”
In his poem “Since Feeling Is First,” American poet e.e. cummings wrote, “for life’s not a paragraph/And death I think is no parenthesis.”

ANTHIMERIA
Substituting one part of speech for another one, such as using a noun as a verb.
In *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare wrote “I’ll unhair thy head.”

ONOMATOPOEIA
Onomatopoeia is the use or creation of words that imitate real sounds, such as *bang*, *hiss*, *click*, or *fizzle*. The chickadee’s name is an example of onomatopoeia, since the word imitates the bird’s call.

SYMBOL
A symbol is an object, such as the flag, that stands for something invisible or for an abstraction.

John Donne’s famous sonnet, “Death, Be Not Proud,” was first published in 1633, two years after his death. What figures of speech do you see in the poem?

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think’st thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul’s delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell;
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell’st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.
FIGURES OF TRUTH?
What should we make of these figures of speech? Are they necessary? Is it true that we must, as Polonius says in *Hamlet*, by indirections find directions out? It would seem so, at least in terms of communicating effectively. Humanity has invested so much effort into devising figures of speech—and there are dozens we haven’t mentioned—that there must be a fire causing the smoke. There must be a need to express things in these creative ways.

Part of the reason may be, Socratically speaking, beyond our understanding, but we can make a few guesses. One is that figures of speech are surprises. They catch us off-guard and thus call our attention to the idea. If Macbeth had said, “I feel so much guilt,” that would not have gotten his wife’s attention the way “Full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife” did. A second factor is the sheer thrill of creativity that we experience when we encounter a good figure of speech. In *Macbeth*, a servant comes to tell Macbeth that thousands of enemy soldiers are approaching his castle. Macbeth asks:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MACBETH</th>
<th>Where got’st thou that goose look?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Servant</td>
<td>There is ten thousand—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MACBETH</td>
<td>Geese, villain!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servant</td>
<td>Soldiers, sir.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MACBETH</td>
<td>Go prick thy face, and over-red thy fear,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thou lily-liver’d boy. What soldiers, patch?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Death of thy soul! those linen cheeks of thine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are counsellors to fear. What soldiers, whey-face?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servant</td>
<td>The English force, so please you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MACBETH</td>
<td>Take thy face hence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exit Servant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Go cut your face and let the blood cover your cowardly paleness. Take your face away. The vivid nature of this synecdoche makes the scene real in our imaginations.

How might different figures of speech express the same truth?
Socrates was a blank tape.
Socrates was like a hollow bone.
Socrates knew millions of nothing.
Socrates knew everything about nothing.
Socrates was wisely dumbfounded.
Socrates was not entirely ignorant.
Socrates ignored his own mind.
There was nothing Socrates didn’t know.
Socrates, the question man.
Knowledge laughed at Socrates.
Socrates surprised their ears.
Socrates knew clunk.
There was nothing Socrates didn’t know.
LET’S HAVE FUN WITH FIGURES OF SPEECH
Whatever we learn, there is no substitute for personal, direct experience, and so it is with figures of speech. Write a short poem that gives you a chance to play with figures of speech. Play with sound, play with grammar, take some risks with the wording. Have some fun.

Gravity’s Day Off
Michael Clay Thompson

MONDAY
Gravity’d had ‘nough. Needed time off.
There’d be trouble, couldn’t be helped—so
tired of holding rubble down. And up. And left.
Tuesday’d be good. He’d let go slow so’s they’d ease aloft.
Yeah, they’d grumble awright, but then he gruffed:
I’m the big tooth, the crude truth, I’m like the main drain.
I win. “Mr. G,” they’ll ‘plain, “force us together!” But nooo, not Tuesday.

TUESDAY
Then people felt light-heavied. On Earth-top,
they could jump real high! Then all the tides
began a-tiding south. Then on the planet bottom there,
they ’gan to fall. People, that’s who. They tried
to grip the upside down stuff, grabbed on to their cars, but cars were not unfalling too. Soon woosh, and vast encyclopedias of people, dogs, smiles, Cokes, waves, and fleas were dropping downunder, like planet piñata. Waaah!

WEDNESDAY
“Uh-oh,” he thought. “Some great idea. All hands on deck!
It’s back to work,” and out extunned his longy hand,
and got’em. Put’em back. But he could do it,
’cause he was rested.
I have never set up as any man’s teacher.
- Plato, *Apology*

Why don’t half the people in the world feel like they are upside down? What does this mean?
What have we learned about figures of speech?

POETRY
We have learned that in addition to all of the techniques for controlling the sound of words, poets also have an array of indirect creative techniques for expressing ideas. These devices, called *figures of speech*, help poets express truths with force and originality. Any plain statement of facts or conclusions can be tedious; knowing a way to make truth clear, and to make its importance known, is an art.

PLATO
We have learned that even though Plato was writing books to explain his philosophy, he used methods of poetry and creative writing, including figures of speech. We have learned that in his own defense before the jury of Athenian citizens, Plato’s Socrates used a simile to explain why he was valuable to Athens and should not be executed; in this simile Socrates is a gadfly, stinging and persuading the citizens of Athens to do the right thing. Nothing required Plato to write his philosophy as plays with characters; nothing required him to use poetic strategies such as figures of speech; other famous philosophers used formal essays, not dialogue. By his choices, Plato showed the importance he gave to the art of expressing truth.

TRUTH
Our discussion of figures of speech has helped us learn that truth is elusive. Even if we can perceive it, or aspects of it, putting what we perceive into words that will awaken others’ attention and create a clear and accurate idea in their minds is difficult. There are times, paradoxically, when the truth can be more accurately stated with a figure of speech.

What would we still like to know?
Neither of us has much knowledge, but he thinks he knows things he does not know, and I am quite conscious of my ignorance.
- Plato, Apology
POETRY, PLATO, AND THE PROBLEM OF TRUTH

This is a good time to move away from the details of poetry and ask what poetry is really about. What if someone were to say that the entire endeavor is absurd? In fact, W.H. Auden, in his “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” wrote that “Poetry makes nothing happen: it survives in the valley of its making where executives would never want to tamper.” Could we agree that poetry is useless? From a material point of view, we don’t have anything after poetry that we did not have before it.

But there is this perplexing truth that poetry has had such a persistent and honored place in civilization. Even in the ancient world, poetry was a focus of human emphasis. Among the earliest major documents we know of are some of the greatest poems: The Odyssey and Iliad, Beowulf, and the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, which was discovered on twelve clay tablets in cuneiform writing. The Egyptians wrote poetry, and the Chinese. In Europe every country produced poetry, and some of the supreme techniques in English poetry were imported from other countries such as Italy. Although the number of great poets is always small, millions of people write poetry, many giving large parts of their lives to it. The volume of critical analysis and attention to poetry is gargantuan; it is an entire industry. In many countries poets are national heroes, and holidays are celebrated in their names. The faces of poets are stamped on coins.

Why?

What is all the shouting about, that drives so many people in so many ages and lands to write and read poetry, instead of doing something else?

It has something to do with the relationship between nature and human nature. It would be comparatively easy to live in this world if we were not such an intelligent and emotional species, if we were unaware of ideas or possibilities, if we did not have a creative urge that made us want to improve our caves, if all we had in mind was eating.
But eating is not all we have in mind. We have ideas and dreams. We build, and plant, and plan. We make roads, and paint walls, and carve fancy designs into wooden trim. We spend decades building pyramids, and sculpt giant faces into mountainsides. We move rocks into vast designs on desert floors. We write history, do mathematics, and think about the origin of the universe.

Many of these works are not necessary. They are not done because then we will be warmer, or safer, or more comfortable. They will not end our hunger or thirst. They represent an enormous amount of labor, yet in material terms they are often more of a sacrifice than a benefit. What was the benefit of placing the monstrous stones at Stonehenge? How much valuable time and energy did ancient Britons (2000 B.C.?) have to commit in order to stand those fifty-ton stones up?

The alert intelligence that characterizes human nature makes us need more from life than food and sleep. We care. We want to extend our creative visions into the world and bring new ideas into being; we want to look below the surface and understand the deep truths of reality, and perhaps more than anything else, we want meaning.

We want life to mean something, and we need to hear the meaning said. We don’t want meaning to grumble vaguely in the background, where we dimly know it is there but don’t know what it is. “To be, in any form,” Whitman wrote, “What is that?” We want to know what the meaning is, and that takes special language, that poets express for us all.
In *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman wrote: “I do not say these things for a dollar or to fill up the time while I wait for a boat. It is you talking just as much as myself. I act as the tongue of you.” And he explained the purpose of his poetry in words that Socrates would have loved: “It is time to explain myself—let us stand up. What is known I strip away, I launch all men and women forward with me into the Unknown.”
THE PROBLEM OF TRUTH

Poetry is, as Whitman understood, a kind of launching into the unknown. It is something—like science or philosophy, music or mathematics—that human beings do in response to the unknown nature of nature. After all, if the answers were already known, science would be unnecessary, and poems would be pointless.

It is wanting to know what is unknown—unknown but important—that motivates poetry. That is what Socrates and Plato have in common with Dickinson and Tennyson, Whitman and Keats. Poets take their minds far into the deep questions that all of us long to understand: love, time, justice, doing right, memory, change, and many other unknown truths, and then they return, with sentences cut like jewels, to tell their story.

Imagine a world where any question could be answered immediately. Perhaps there would be a Fast Response site on the internet, and if you typed in any question—how does gravity grab stuff, or when did the universe begin, or what causes war, or how can we make love last, or is there other life in the universe and what is it, or how can we capture a giant squid alive—the true answer would snap back at once. There would be no more need for science. No one would have to work for any answers any more.

Everything, anything, any time, could be known.
What effect would the loss of the unknown have on civilization?
Would it be a benefit? What problems would arise that we do not face now, if there were no unknowns, no secrets, nothing hidden. Imagine a dialogue between the questioner and the FRD, the Fast Response Device:

Q: Is there really a Bermuda Triangle?
FRD: Nope. It's a myth.
Q: Uh...what about those planes that vanished?
FRD: Storm.
Q: Ok. Next question...Where is Alexander’s tomb?
FRD: In Alexandria. Thirty feet beneath the Pharaoh Bank building.
Q: Thanks. Mmmm, how many species on Earth are still undiscovered?
FRD: 7,953,821, but 27% are endangered and may not be there long.
Q: I heard they found DNA in a Tyrannosaurus Rex leg bone. Can we make a living T-Rex from that DNA, and how?
FRD: Yep. Have you got a pencil? This could take a while.

We must admit to wishing we could know the answers to many questions, such as the location of Alexander’s bones and how gravity keeps the Earth in orbit. But deep down, the loss of the unknown would be a tragedy.

The exploration of the mysteries, whether through poetry or philosophy or other paths, is one of life’s supreme experiences. It is good that in the stage of the world, there are some shadows, for part of the meaning of life is searching for the meaning of life.

It is good for everyone that some individuals, Socrates-like, probe into the corners of life, and then—using vowels and consonants, meter and rhyme scheme, stanzas and figures of speech, talent and intuition—make language so good that everyone can see the vision. Emily Dickinson wrote:

   I took my power in my hand
   And went against the world;
   ’Twas not so much as David had,
   But I was twice as bold.
Our themes of poetry, Plato, and the problem of truth come together easily because they were always together. Poetry is a way of exploring the unknown in search of truth, and the poet has unique powers of making truth clear. Plato’s poetic Dialogues, written at the inception of western intellectual history, are infused with a profound respect for the unknown and for how pursuing the truth brings meaning to life. “The unexamined life,” Socrates said, “is not worth living.” Plato’s account of the perplexed interrogations of Socrates have so influenced thought in the more than two thousand years since Socrates’s death, that Alfred North Whitehead said the entire history of western thought is nothing but a series of footnotes to Plato. And as for the problem of truth? It is a problem indeed, for truth is difficult to nail down. A full exploration of what knowledge is and how we can know if something is knowledge or not is beyond the limits of this book, but we can see that trying to understand the truth is a common core of life, of philosophy, and of poetry. The fact that it is difficult does not mean that trying is pointless.

Consider this: the rules of poetry increase its ability to express the truth. Of poetry as an art, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) wrote:

Imagine not that I am about to oppose genius to rules. No! the comparative value of these rules is the very cause to be tried. The spirit of poetry, like all other living powers, must of necessity circumscribe itself by rules, were it only to unite power with beauty. It must embody in order to reveal itself; but a living body is of necessity an organized one; and what is organization but the connexion of parts in and for a whole, so that each part is at once end and means?—This is no discovery of criticism;—it is a necessity of the human mind; and all nations have felt and obeyed it, in the invention of metre, and measured sounds, as the vehicle and involucrum of poetry—itself a fellow-growth from the same life,—even as the bark is to the tree!

No work of true genius dares want its appropriate form, neither indeed is there any danger of this.