

Royal Fireworks

Language Arts

by Michael Clay Thompson

POETRY, Plato, and the Problem of Truth

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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*

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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.

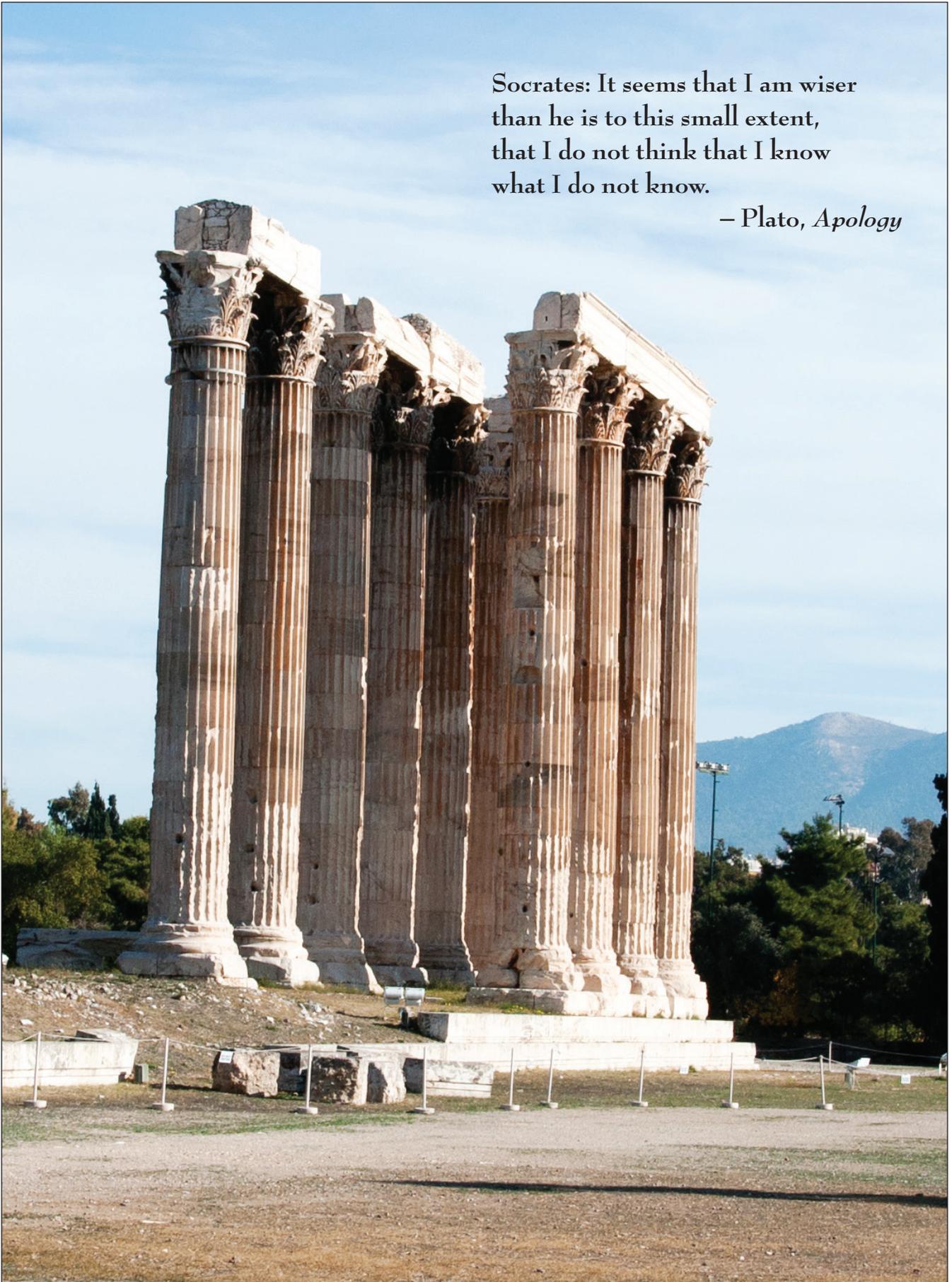
On the one hand, we want to say that the sky is blue; you could call it *green*, but you would be wrong. We want to say that things fall down, not up, and that's a fact. We want to say that there are thousands or even millions of things that are true, obviously true, and that there can be no doubt about 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*

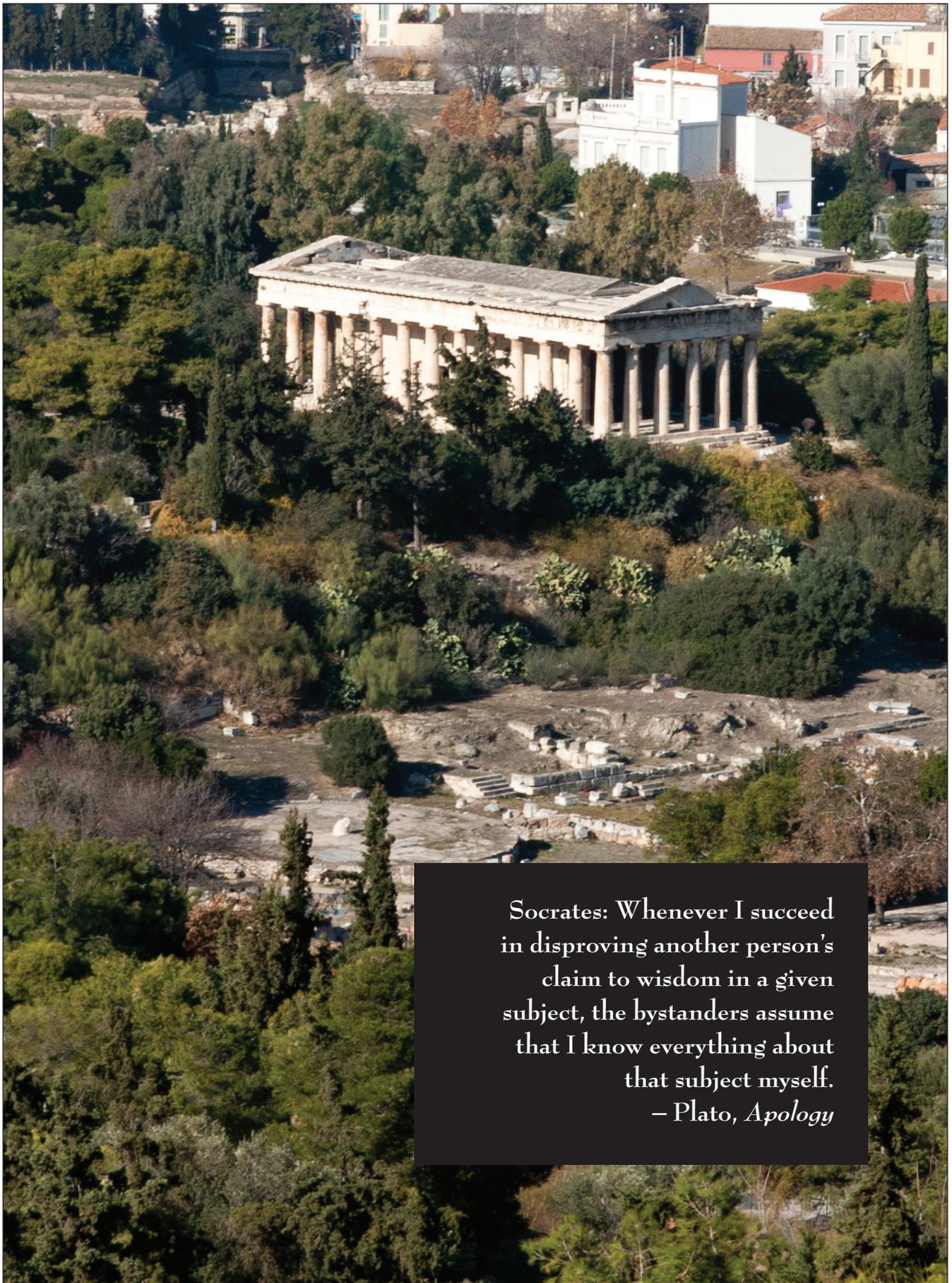


Of course, it is not only ordinary individuals who have changed their minds and contradicted one another; it is also leading thinkers, scientists, and artists. In the centuries—and even millennia—since the first civilizations, theories of the universe have come and gone. Great poets, playwrights, and 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 superseded 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 universe seems to be good at concealing the truth or at deceiving us by showing only part of the truth. We often are 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*

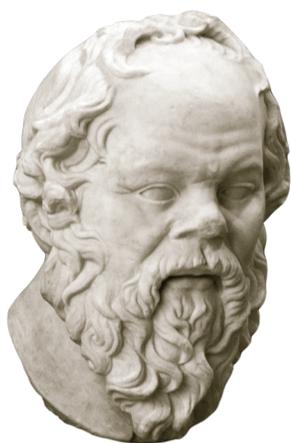
The more we learn, the more we ask. The more details we see, the more we also see the gaps, the contradictions, the ambiguities. New facts lead to new questions. Education frees us from ignorant stereotypes and popular myths; it leads us to the frontiers of knowledge and exposes false claims.

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.

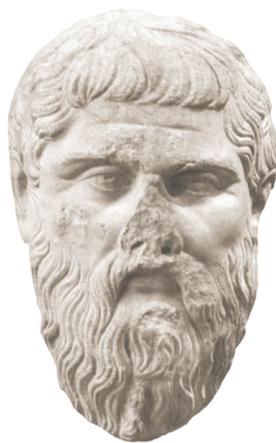
We read one biography of Alexander the Great; he seems like a hero and a military genius. We read a second biography of Alexander, and he seems to be a brutal conqueror who annihilated anyone who stood in his way. We read a third, and we find a sensitive Alexander full of psychological complexity and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

Truth?

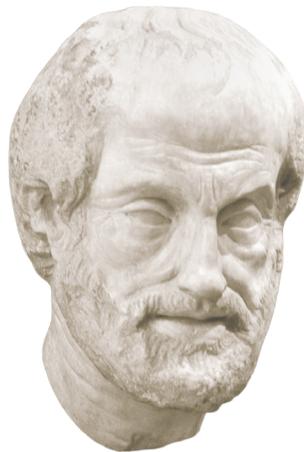
What do we really mean by the word *truth*, and where did our concept of truth come from?



SOCRATES



PLATO



ARISTOTLE



ALEXANDER

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.

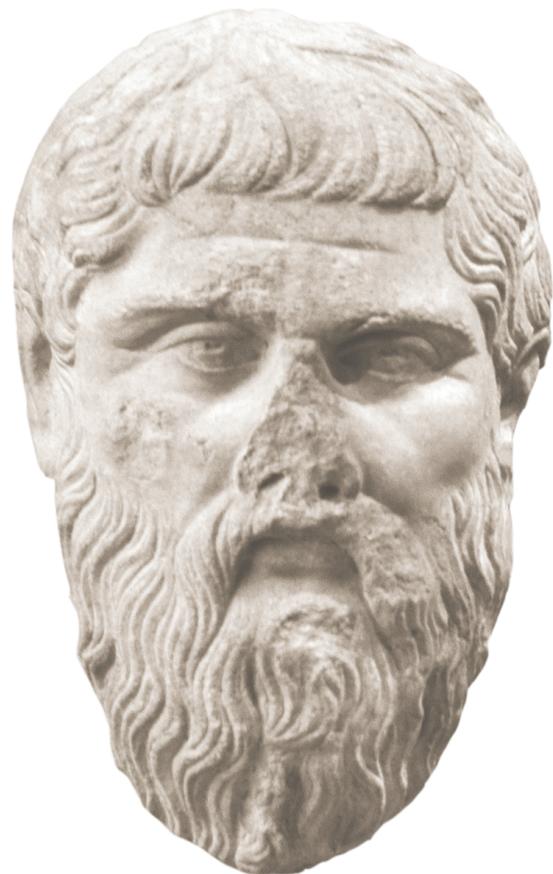
Socrates describes the day he learned that the oracle of Apollo at Delphi had called him the wisest man in Athens. He was shocked because he did not feel wise in any way—and yet the oracle could not be wrong. What could it mean?

Socrates decided to begin seeking out people who were famous for their wisdom to discuss truths with them and to 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 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, would 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

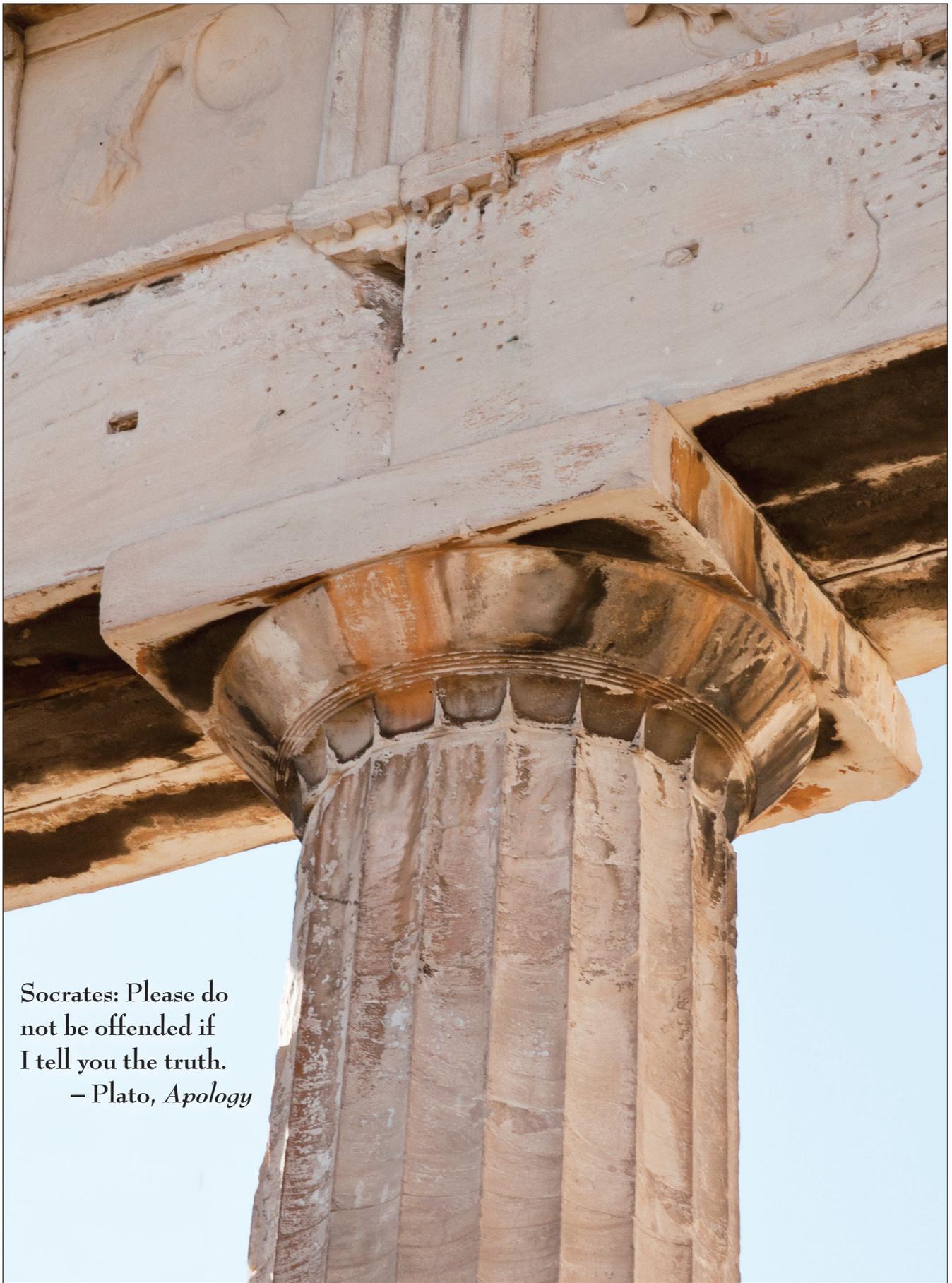
The notion that poems tell truth may seem, at first, unpersuasive. How can truth be pursued through the writing of poems? How can an idea in a poem be considered true? How would we know if anything in a poem is true or not? After all, poetry is not like science, in which tested methods are used to confirm 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; like the follow-up in science, the follow-up in poetry, though different, weeds out the pretenders, leaving the strongest poems.

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

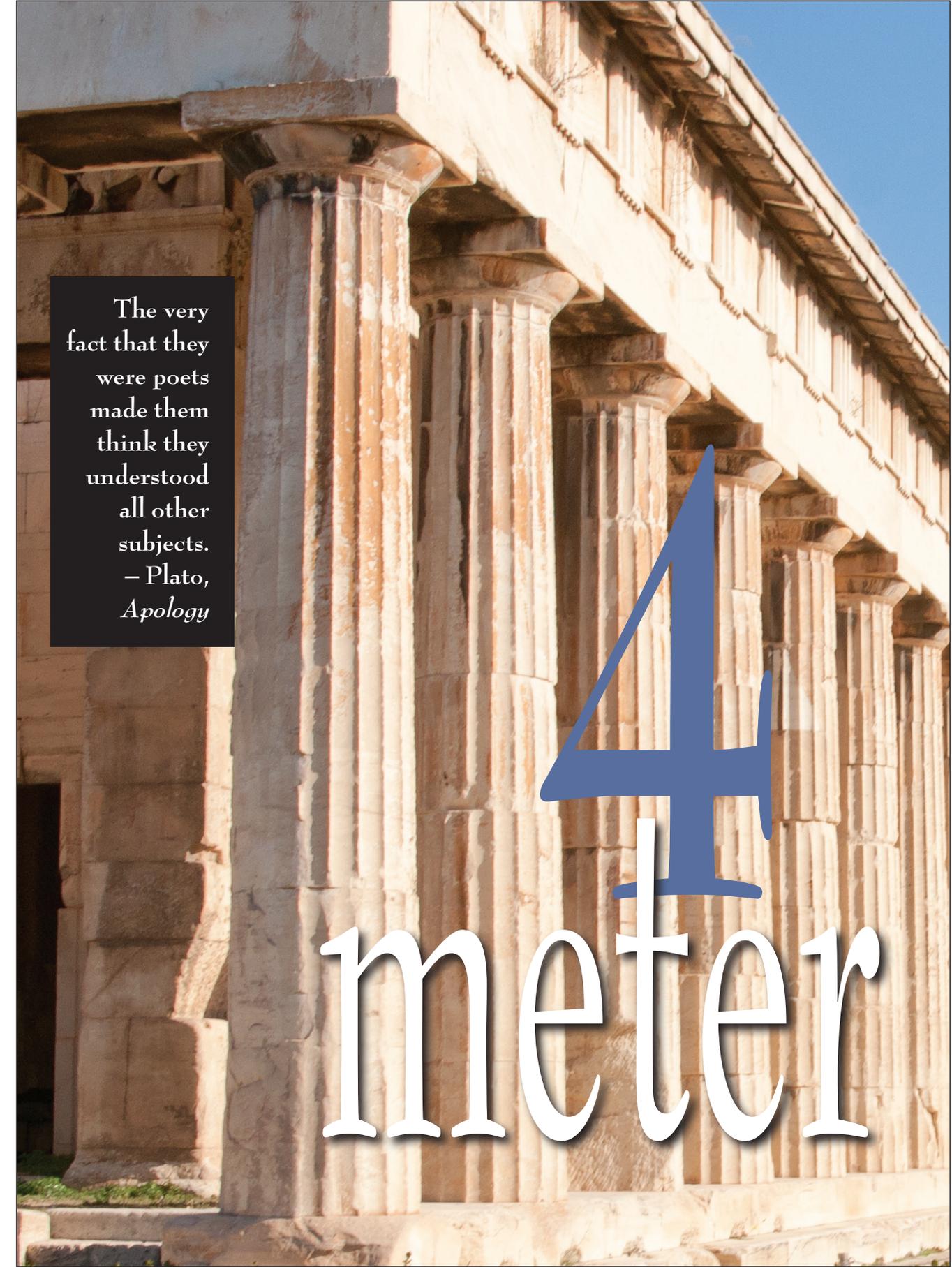
THE WONDERFUL PROBLEM OF TRUTH

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 it 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.



The very
fact that they
were poets
made them
think they
understood
all other
subjects.
– Plato,
Apology

4 meter

iamb	amphimacer
trochee	amphibrach
dactyl	spondee
anapest	pyrrhic

THE TRUTH OF METER

It may seem that we have considered every possible idea for designing the sounds of words, but we have only begun. The types of sounds, and their relationships to each other, form one level of poetry; the second level is **meter**, and meter is involved in every syllable of every word of every poem.

METER and STRESS

Meter has to do with the fact that each syllable we speak is either **stressed** or **unstressed**. When we pronounce the word *rabbit*, we say RABit, not raBIT. The first syllable of *rabbit* is stressed, is pronounced with more volume and emphasis.

Marbles are MARbles, not marBULLS. Crunchy is KRUNchee, not krunCHEE. If we are sipping a drink, we are SIPPing, not sippING. Mickey and Minnie are not micKEY and miNEE, they are MICKee and MINee. Correct stress is so important that when we mis-stress a syllable, the word sounds wrong, sometimes even laughable.

Sometimes stress is the difference between two words.

The eighth month is *August*, pronounced AWgust. But there is an adjective, *august*, meaning sublime and dignified, and it is pronounced awGUST:

In August, the ceremony was conducted with august formality.

What about *recent* and *resent*? The event was recent, but the package was resent.

Did you see Mikey? Did you see my key? Apple, a pull. Telephone, tell a phone.

There were highlights, there were high lights.

Stress plays a part in every syllable of every word,
and so even if we do not think about it, we create a pattern
of stressed and unstressed syllables in every sentence.
If we color stressed syllables blue and unstressed syllables
gray, a sentence might look like this:

We create a pattern of stressed
and unstressed syllables.

Since the stresses are such an important part of language,
poets control the patterns, creating wavy rhythms with
the rise and fall of stresses. This arrangement of stresses
into wavy rhythms is called **meter**. In Emily Dickinson's poem
about madness and sense, every second syllable is stressed:

Much Madness is divinest Sense—
To a discerning Eye—

The pattern that repeats itself is a two-syllable pattern with the
second syllable stressed. A repeating stress pattern is called a **foot**.
Line one of Dickinson's poem has eight syllables, making four two-syllable feet,
and line two has six syllables, making three feet:

Much Mad / ness is / di vin / est Sense—
To a / dis cern / ing Eye—

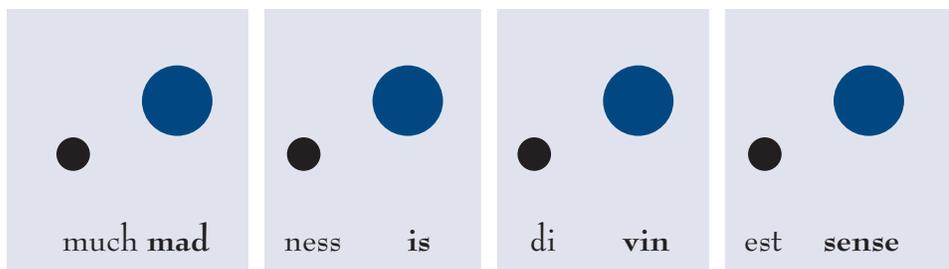
Notice that the foot is made of syllables, not words. A foot can be made
of the last syllable of one word and the first syllable of the next.
A foot can be the first two syllables of a three-syllable word.

IAMB, iambic

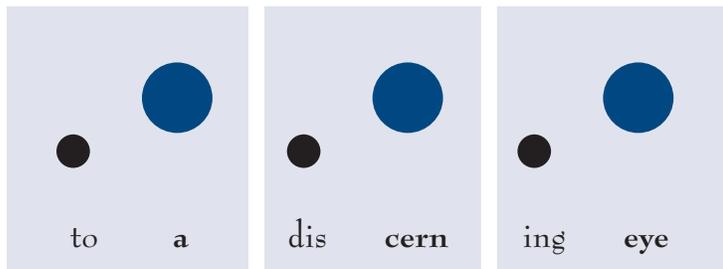
In English poetry the four traditional types of poetic foot have either two or three syllables with only one syllable stressed.

By far the most common foot in English poetry is the **iamb**.

An iamb is a two-syllable foot with the second syllable stressed, just as we saw in Emily Dickinson's poem. The first line of Dickinson's poem has four iambs:



And the second line has three iambs:



This steady use of iambic meter is common in traditional poetry (though most modern poetry is not written in strict meter). Why would this smooth, alternating rhythm be the most common foot in English poetry? The reason is that the English language tends to be iambic naturally. Iambs sound normal to the English-speaking ear.

The Eng / lish lang / uage tends / to be / i am / bic nat / ura lly.

At the end of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet is murdered, and his best and true friend Horatio looks down in grief; he says:

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

It is an august moment, made more solemn by the sedate iambic meter of the words. Steady, true to form, the iambics are perfect for the dignity and tragedy of the moment. Each of the two lines has ten syllables, five feet per line:

1 2 3 4 5

Now cracks / a no / ble heart / Good night / sweet prince
And flights / of an / gels sing / thee to / thy rest

SCANSION

When we scan the metrical feet of a line of poetry such as we just did, this scan is called **scansion**. Our scansion of these two lines from *Hamlet* reveals a pattern of five iambs per line. The possible exceptions are feet one and five in line one: *now cracks, sweet prince*. It is possible that these could be read as a double stresses, boom boom. If we read a foot as a double stress, then the foot would not be an iamb but would be a special type of foot called a **spondee**, which we will discuss in more detail soon.

a no / ble heart

We begin to see the depth of creativity in poetry: the words simultaneously use both sound and meter. “Now cracks a noble heart” is an essentially iambic line, but in the iambic is a brilliant use of sound, with the soft and low *now noble* encasing the shock of the *k* sounds in *cracks*:

now CRACKS noble

The *n*'s are the opposite of the harsh *k* sounds, and the *o*'s are the opposite of the *ah* sound of *cracks*. By surrounding *cracks* with beautiful, low sounds, Shakespeare brought the meaning of *cracks* (Hamlet's death) to the front.

The angelic softness of the sounds in the second line, “And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest,” emphasize the tenderness and deep feeling of the moment; look at the soft consonants:

And flights / of an / gels sing / thee to / thy rest

This two-line passage is a good illustration of the way that poets can write a passage predominately in iambics while still varying from perfect iambics when they want to place emphasis or break up a too-regular rhythm. Shakespeare established a clear iambic framework but emphasized Hamlet's death and Horatio's deep regard for him.

NOW CRACKS SWEET PRINCE

In 1896 the English poet A.E. Housman (1859-1936) wrote this poem about the pains and pitfalls of growing up. Housman is famous for his precision and economic use of words. Look at Housman's iambs:

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard a wise man say,
"Give crowns and pounds and guineas
But not your heart away;
Give pearls away and rubies
But keep your fancy free."
But I was one-and-twenty
No use to talk to me.

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard him say again,
"The heart out of the bosom
Was never given in vain;
'Tis paid with sighs a plenty
And sold for endless rue."
And I am two-and-twenty
And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

Notice that Housman used three iambs for even-numbered lines, and in all of the odd-numbered lines, he added a final unstressed syllable to the line. This is known as a **feminine ending**.

When I / was one / and twen / ty

1
2
3

I heard / a wise / man say

If we remove the odd-numbered lines from the poem, we can see that the even-numbered lines are perfectly iambic, three iambs to each line. This is called *iambic trimeter*.

I heard	/	a wise	/	man say
But not	/	your heart	/	a way
But keep	/	your fan	/	cy free
No use	/	to talk	/	to me
I heard	/	him say	/	a gain
Was ne	/	ver given	/	in vain
And sold	/	for end	/	less rue
And oh,	/	'tis true	/	'tis true

Notice that Housman used an elided syllable in the second foot of line twelve: the word *given* is compressed into a single syllable: *giv'n*. This is a common device and is not regarded as a flaw.

We see poet after poet doing this: writing poems in precise meter but doing it so gracefully that we scarcely notice when we read the poems. Particularly when the poems are iambic, they sound so natural that we could almost think the poets did it unawares, that they just wrote something that sounded right, and it turned out to be iambic. Once we examine a poem such as Housman's closely, and see that even-numbered lines are all perfect iambic trimeter, and odd-numbered lines are all iambic trimeter with one extra unstressed syllable added, we realize that this level of precision would never happen by accident. It is impressive art.