

Royal Fireworks

Language Arts

by Michael Clay Thompson

POETRY, Plato,
and the Problem of Beauty

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You are aware that speech signifies all things and is always turning them round and round, and has two forms, true and false?

– Plato, *Cratylus*

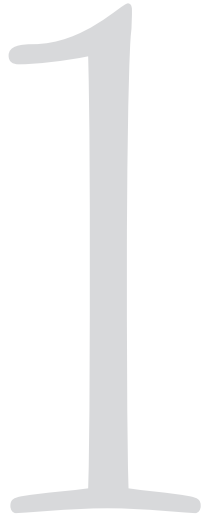
POETRY, PLATO, AND THE PROBLEM OF BEAUTY

Not all poems are beautiful. Some of the greatest poems focus on life's fiercest days. The idea that poems are pretty, or are supposed to be pretty, is false; poets probe into every aspect of existence, just as painters and composers do. There are paintings, concertos, and poems that are profoundly tragic—as there should be, because tragedy is part of the experience of life and is therefore a meaningful subject of all art. To confine poets or other artists only to beautiful subjects would be an artistic absurdity, and artists would not tolerate it.

Having said that, we must also acknowledge that many poems are beautiful and that beauty itself is the subject of some of the greatest poems. Like tragedy, beauty is an important part of life. Many experiences that make life worth living are beautiful, and our sense of beauty is what motivates many intense human efforts. In our appearances, in our homes, in our possessions, in the things we go to see and hear, beauty is a powerful lure. Because of beauty, we are drawn to the lake, to the mountains, to the shore; we see beauty in children's faces, in a sunset, in a tree. We also hear beauty in the wind, in Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto*, and in voices. Intellectually, we are moved by the beauty of clear concepts, of mathematics, of many forms of truth. Some things are both beautiful and sad.

We are so involved with the beautiful that we speak the word *beauty* without a thought, as an obvious concept, something that everyone knows.

And yet, do we know? Do we know what beauty is? Can we state, clearly, the difference between something that is beautiful and something that is not beautiful? If we have a beautiful landscape, a beautiful song, a beautiful dance, and a beautiful mathematical equation, what is the thing that they all share? What do they have in common that makes us call all of them *beautiful*?



IS BEAUTY RELATIVE?

It is said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, meaning that beauty is not absolute, that one person might find something beautiful that another would not. Although there is something to that argument—that beauty is personal, relative to the observer—it is also true that there seem to be universals of beauty. The perception that the orange and red leaves of maple trees in the autumn are beautiful is as unanimous as anything in human experience. The same is true for ocean sunsets, children's laughter, and the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens. Although we are not all in perfect agreement, there do seem to be central principles involved in humanity's perception of beauty.

But what are they? What do diverse beauties have in common? If we can produce no cogent answer to this question, does it mean that the word *beauty* is meaningless? That it refers to nothing?

IS BEAUTY A MYSTERY?

Let's take a closer look at the difficulty of the problem. Are all beautiful things colorful? No. Are they all shiny? No. Are they all audible? No. Do all beautiful things contain contrasting shades such as black and light gray? No. Are all beautiful things natural? No. Do all beautiful things have shapes? No. Do they have more than one element? No. Do all beautiful things contain some kind of relationship? No. Do they all make us happy? No.

It is very difficult.

Human beings have been pondering this for thousands of years.



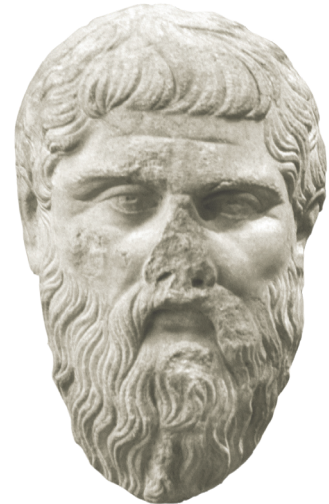
...a poet is a light and winged thing,
and holy, and never able to compose
until he has become inspired, and
is beside himself, and reason is no
longer in him.

– Plato, *Ion*

Among the earliest major thinkers to examine the problem of beauty was Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher whose ideas are so important to Western culture that the great modern philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once said, “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.” In other words, Plato laid out all the lines of thought that we have been pursuing for centuries, and we have only worked on the small details!

PLATO (428-347 B.C.E.)

Born to a wealthy Athenian family, Plato was a student of Socrates. When in 399 B.C.E. Socrates was tried and put to death for corrupting the youth and believing in false gods, the disillusioned Plato decided to become a philosopher, since public life was not safe. Plato founded a school of philosophy in Athens in a grove called *Academe*, and today we still refer to scholarship as *academics*. Among Plato’s pupils was Aristotle, who became the teacher of Alexander the Great.



Socrates did not write down his philosophy; he left no books. The colossal effect he has had on Western civilization is almost entirely due to Plato’s accounts of conversations that Socrates had with people in Athens. Typically, Socrates exposed the ignorance of those who claimed to have knowledge, and in his final defense before a jury of Athenians, he explained that he himself did not claim to know: he was profoundly aware of the world’s mystery. “I only know,” he said, “that I know nothing.” This statement is called the *Socratic paradox*.

Plato did write books, which are called Plato’s *Dialogues*, and in almost all of them, the philosophy is presented through a dialogue or conversation between Socrates and someone else: *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, or others. In each of Plato’s *Dialogues*, Socrates discusses a different problem; for example, in the *Meno* they discuss what virtue is. Through these dialogues, we believe that we have our clearest view of Socrates; Plato knew him well, was present at his trial, and provided us with a convincing portrait of him.

PLATO'S DIALOGUES

The subject of beauty comes up in a number of Plato's *Dialogues*, particularly in the *Ion*, the *Cratylus*, and the *Symposium*.

The *Ion* focuses on art, and the *Cratylus* focuses on language.

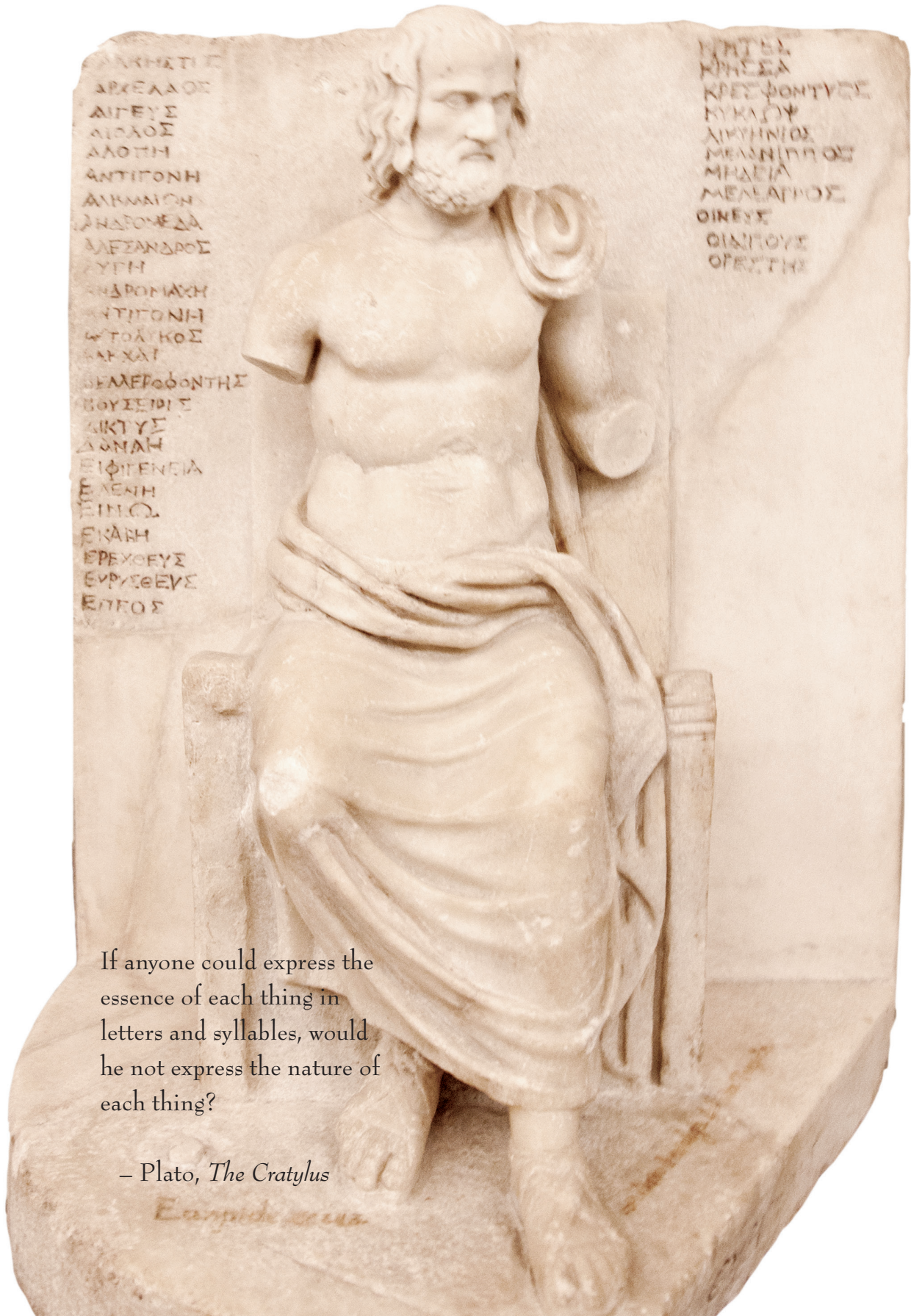
Plato's *Symposium* is regarded as one of the two greatest Platonic dialogues, *The Republic* being the other. The scene in the *Symposium* is a supper party hosted by Agathon, a poet, and in the course of the evening, the guests make speeches on the subject of love. It is in this context that the discussion of beauty arises because we tend to love what is beautiful. In his speech Agathon speaks of human love; it is Socrates who pushes the argument further. Socrates says that we begin by loving beauty in humanity, then we grow to love the beauty of the soul, then the beauty of ideas, and finally we love beauty itself, absolute beauty.

OUR FOCUS IS POETRY

Our focus in *Poetry, Plato, and the Problem of Beauty* is not Plato; it is poetry, but we will use Plato's *Dialogues* as a source of ideas and questions to draw our thinking deeper into the complex problem of beauty. In addition to ideas from Plato, we will mention other theories of beauty that are prominent in intellectual history, such as Aristotle's *Poetics*.

One of the things we learn about poetry, once we begin to understand it, is that poets are serious artists who go to extraordinary efforts to write powerful and almost perfect expressions of truth. When we inspect poems closely, we find that poets often have arranged every syllable, every vowel and consonant, to create a composition that propels the idea of the poem forward. The greatest traditional poems are remarkably like symphonies in which the composer has special parts for the horn section, the brass section, the woodwind section. A poet gives special parts to the vowel section, the consonant section, and the meter section. Each line and each word of the poem are orchestrated, with the letters of the words sounding out like notes on a musical staff.

Poetry is something that has to be studied to be believed.



If anyone could express the essence of each thing in letters and syllables, would he not express the nature of each thing?

– Plato, *The Cratylus*



THE BEAUTY OF THE VOICE

It would be easy, in studying the sounds of poetry, to feel that one was studying something else, something alien, something other than oneself. The building materials of poetry, however, come from that zone below the nose. We speak, parts of our face move, and out flow sounds connected in funny ways. Some are like flutes or oboes and make *ch* and *ew* songy sounds. Other sounds are like sticks scratching on window screens and make *k* and hard *g* sounds. Some sounds are murmury, like *mmmm* and *nnnnn*. Others are screammy, like *eeeeee!* Some sounds hiss, like *sssssssss*, and others sound like rain: *shshshshshsh*.

If we want to, we can combine a choppy sound, *ch*, with a timid vowel sound, *ih*, and a scratchy sound, *k*, and an uncertain vowel sound, *eh*, and a murmury sound, *n*, and we can get the whole chain of sounds:

ch-ih-k-eh-n

CHICKEN



BEAUTIFUL
PATTERNS
OF SOUND

3

BEAUTIFUL PATTERNS OF SOUND

Imagine that our language had only one sound— one vowel or consonant. In that case, every word would have the same sound. If the sound was the consonant *m*, then every word would be made only of *m*'s, and the differences among words would have to be differences of length, or perhaps emphasis. A bird might be *mmm*, and a rock *mmmmmmm*. A person could be *mmmmMMMMM*!

Devising a language of only one sound would not be easy, and no known human language uses only one sound. Perhaps the closest approximation to a one-sound language would be Morse Code, made of dots and dashes, or binary computer language, made of ones and zeros.

The fortunate fact that English contains a good choice of vowels and consonants makes it possible to control these sounds deliberately, not only to avoid blathering random nonsense but also to arrange vowels and consonants in intentional—often beautiful—patterns.

One of the elements that is most characteristic of poetry is precisely that: the arrangement of sounds in sentences. In fact, that would make a good working definition of poetry: the methodical arrangement of sounds in sentences in order to support meaning.

When the arrangement of sounds leads to specific sounds being systematically repeated, we have patterns, such as a series of words beginning the same way, or ending the same way, or using the same vowel or consonant.

RHYME

One of the most common patterns in poetry is **rhyme**. When words end with the same sounds, or almost the same sounds, that is rhyme. When Emily Dickinson wanted to write a four-line poem about the ocean, she used rhyme to connect line two with line four:

An everywhere of silver,
With ropes of **sand**
To keep it from effacing
The track called **land**.

Rhyme is the best-known poetic technique; many readers identify poetry with rhyme and imagine that rhyme is the very essence of poetry. We will see that this is not true. Rhyme is *one* of the important devices, but there are many more, and some great poems do not use rhyme at all. Many modern poets even avoid rhyme and build their poems with other techniques.

It may seem that we have explained rhyme sufficiently, but there is much more to say. Within the idea of rhyme, poets have developed an array of options, some obvious and some subtle, and it is instructive to explore these options in detail since this gives us an unexpected view of the secret world of the poet.

First, notice that rhymes do not have to be spelled the same way. The words *cough* and *doff* are rhymes because they end in the same sound. Also, a true rhyme cannot be limited to a consonant; *bent* and *flat* are not rhymes, but *know* and *though* are.

End Rhyme

When rhymes occur in the last words of lines, such as in the Emily Dickinson poem about the ocean, that is called **end rhyme**. The English poet John Keats (1795-1821) used end rhyme humorously to write a poem ridiculing the stuffy hypocrisy of Oxford University:



The Gothic looks **solemn**,
The plain Doric **column**
Supports an old Bishop and **Crozier**;
The mouldering **arch**,
Shaded o'er by a **larch**
Stands next door to Wilson the **Hosier**.

Vice—that is by **turns**,—
O'er pale faces **mourns**
The black tassell'd trencher and **common hat**;
The Chantry boy **sings**,
The Steeple-bell **rings**,
And as for the Chancellor—**dominat**.

There are plenty of **trees**,
And plenty of **ease**,
And plenty of fat deer for **Parsons**;
And when it is **venison**,
Short is the **benison**,—
Then each on a leg or thigh **fastens**.

A crozier is a bishop's staff. *Mouldering* means crumbling into particles or dust. A larch is a drooping, graceful deciduous tree. A hosier is a merchant dealing in stockings and hose. A trencher is a mortar board: the black, tasselled academic hat. A benison is a blessing. *Dominat* is Latin for "he dominates" or "he rules."

Keats used contrasting worldly terms to deflate the stiff sanctimony of Oxford—the hosier next to the Bishop, the trencher with the Chancellor, the pious parson hurrying the prayer to dig into (fasten on!) his venison.

We see that Keats used end rhyme in every line, but we also see a few curious details that bear further inspection....



The Gothic looks solemn ,	a
The plain Doric column	a
Supports an old Bishop and Crozier ;	b
The mouldering arch ,	c
Shaded o'er by a larch	c
Stands next door to Wilson the Hosier .	b

Vice—that is by turns ,	d
O'er pale faces mourns	d
The black tassell'd trencher and common hat ;	e
The Chantry boy sings ,	f
The Steeple-bell rings ,	f
And as for the Chancellor— dominat .	e

There are plenty of trees ,	g
And plenty of ease ,	g
And plenty of fat deer for Parsons ;	h
And when it is venison ,	i
Short is the benison ,	i
Then each on a leg or thigh fastens .	h

Internal Rhyme

One thing we notice is subtle sound play *within* the lines. Notice *Gothic* and *Doric* in lines one and two, and notice that within lines five and six Keats rhymed *o'er* and *door*. When rhymes occur within lines, rather than at the ends, that is called **internal rhyme**. The internal rhyme of *o'er* and *door* is quietly supported by echoes in *Doric*, *Supports*, *mourns*, *Chancellor*, and *Short*.

Triple Rhyme

Three-syllable rhyme, such as Keats used in *venison-benison* and *common hat-dominat*, is known as **triple rhyme**.

Near Rhyme

We also see that Keats used rhymes that are inexact.

The word *turns* does not rhyme exactly with *mourns*, and *Parsons* is only a rough approximation of the funny word *fastens*, which depicts the parson with a death-grip on his leg of venison. Such almost-rhymes are called **near rhyme**, **oblique rhyme**, or **slant rhyme**.

Masculine and Feminine Rhyme

Keats also used a combination of one-syllable and two-syllable rhymes.

One-syllable rhymes, like *arch-larch*, *sings-rings*, and *trees-ease*, are called **masculine rhyme**, but when the rhyme is two-syllable with the second syllable unstressed, such as in *solemn-column* or *Crozier-Hosier*, that is **feminine rhyme**.

Rhyme Scheme

Notice that Keats used a repeating pattern for the rhymes in his poem.

In each section (stanza), lines one and two rhyme, lines four and five rhyme, and lines three and six rhyme. We indicate patterns like this by assigning each rhyme sound its own letter; this is called the **rhyme scheme**.

Keats's rhyme scheme in this poem is *aabccb*.

Reverse Rhyme and First-Syllable Rhyme

Keats also used a subtle technique that might go unnoticed.

Instead of rhyming with the last syllables of words, it is possible to rhyme with the first syllables. This is called **reverse rhyme**.

Keats used internal reverse rhyme in *Chantry* and *Chancellor*.

A variation of reverse rhyme is the **first-syllable rhyme**, in which the first syllables of two multi-syllable words end the same way. The words *sniffle* and *griffin* are first-syllable rhyme.

sniffle
griffin

Chancellor
Chantry

RHYME AND BEAUTY?

Now, the question is, does rhyme have anything to do with beauty? For example, in “The Cloud” Shelley used a combination of end rhyme and leonine rhyme. If we were to bold the rhymes of one of the stanzas, it might look like this:

I sift the snow on the mountains below ,	a
And their great pines groan aghast ;	b
And all the night 'tis my pillow white ,	c
While I sleep in the arms of the blast .	b

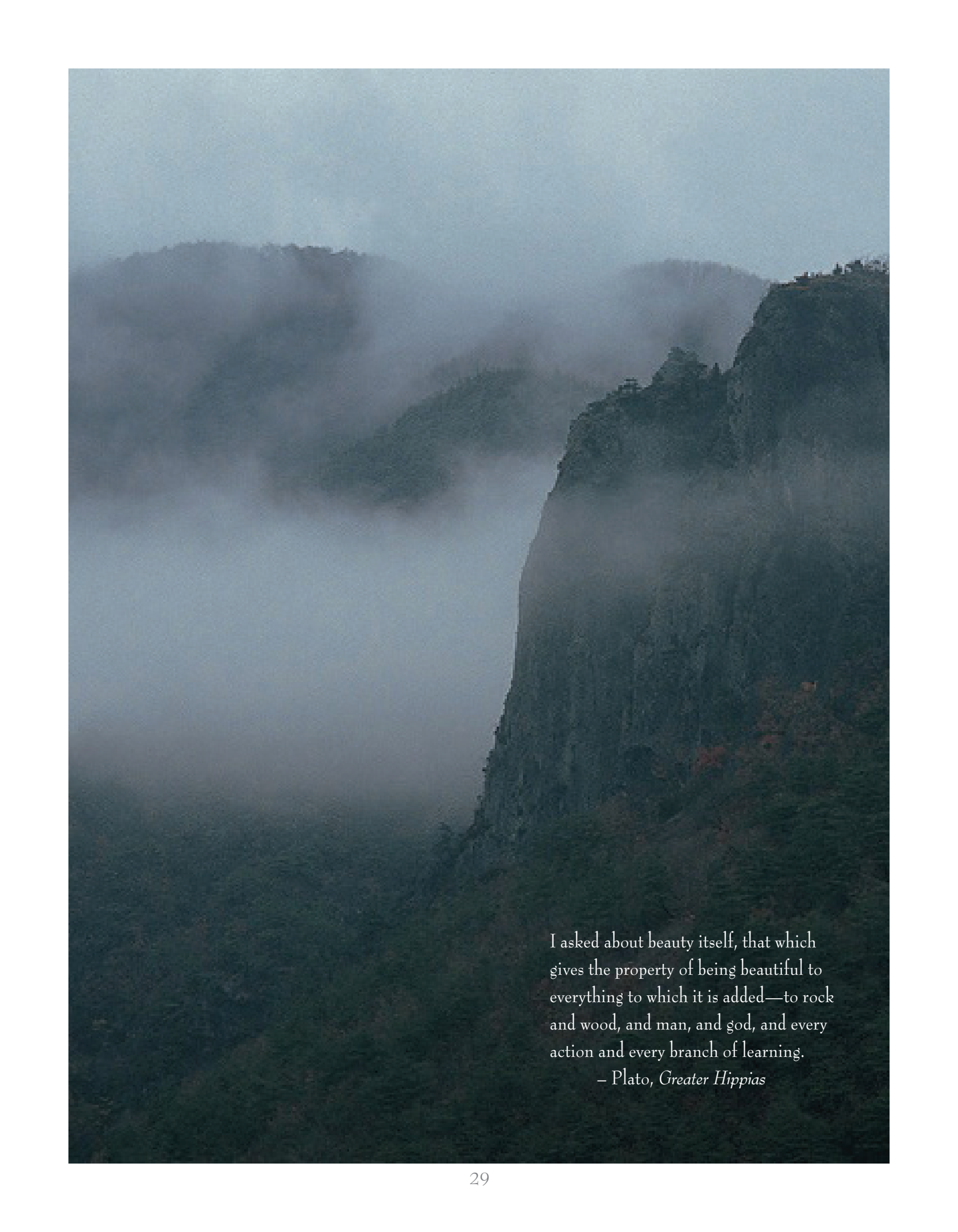
If rhyme did not exist, could this passage be as beautiful? Imagine that there were no such thing as rhyme, and the passage was:

I sift the snow down on the mountains,
And their great pines groan aghast;
And in the dark 'tis my pillow white,
While I sleep in the arms of the storm.

Is there a loss of beauty in the passage? If we feel that there is, then we must wonder in what way we experience rhyme as beautiful. Is it beautiful simply to repeat a sound? Then would the passage be more beautiful if all six rhymes were the same identical sound? Probably not. What if the passage had twelve rhymes instead of six? Would it be twice as beautiful? Probably not. The beauty seems to arise from the presence of a pattern of rhymes. It is a pattern, but it is not monotony. Technique alone is not art.

Does the beauty of rhyme have something to do with memory? Would you say that rhymes work this way: having heard the first rhyme, we are more aware of, and more pleased by, the second? Would we really notice any of these sounds if their rhymes had not preceded them? Is it pleasing to encounter a remembered sound?



A photograph of a misty, mountainous landscape. The scene is dominated by a large, dark, and steep cliff face on the right side, which rises sharply from a valley. The rest of the landscape is shrouded in a thick, greyish-blue mist or fog, obscuring the details of the surrounding hills and valleys. The overall atmosphere is serene and somewhat somber due to the muted colors and low light.

I asked about beauty itself, that which
gives the property of being beautiful to
everything to which it is added—to rock
and wood, and man, and god, and every
action and every branch of learning.

– Plato, *Greater Hippias*