

Socratic Monologues

Prologue

I

at the turn of forty years I descended
to the sunless gardens of Persephone
seeking ease from grievous questions
whose mash was heavy in my belly
whose phlegm shallowed the pleasure of my lungs

I who was once joyous with the gods
had lost their favour, and fallen into error
bitterness, confusion, shame, repentance
ego and giftedness, unknown to one another

doltish as Ganymede with Apollo's lyre
in the mute crook of his arm
and still of a great serenity

tautness of skin and eye—
graceless, unconfident, high of mind

II

what are the hordes of the dead
sensible of in that silent plain?

have they lost reason with desire
and neither stir nor rest themselves?

I came there passing first great vortices
neither of despair nor violence
but these: complacency, leniency with self;
definiteness, hollow of reverence;
fear of silence, bile of age

I knew no route, but was driven
haplessly—and that is sweet, too
lolling on deck as the servile sea
beats you in the whim of its master
Poseidon, or resentfulness

III

the trees about the harbour were bare
and warm tangled their arms together
grey and crinkling
the water of a river, silver, hard
coursed in stone gullies, softened no roots
in that black loam

the air was tintured as with human blood
that scent of earth and iron
and brittle rain
broke on the marble, briefly stilled the dust
I desecrated with footsteps

the open wind gave my tongue no echo

Vanity having no face or colour
had this landscape

IV

now began the velvet air
cling moist to my forehead

no converse so lonely
as approach the dead without ritual

aimless among statues to wander
whose hands have been broken off

on an unpeopled lawn whose edges hung
with fragrant voices autumnal smoke

the fingertips of melody gathered me
broke the first circle of sutured trees

there in that darkness always stumbling
I fell headlong into a swollen grotto

my forearm gashed wherefrom some gout
of blood pooled in the mossy alleys

V: Chorus of the Dead

*lick him
deify him
undress his wounds
open his body under his clothing
every scar receive its dead tongue-tip*

*the boy has dropped his blood
and of us there are thousands*

*flay him
the smear of our bodies
sharp as razors against his belly
oh, even his great fear—
that cadence of pulse*

*nakedness? it is not ourselves we remember
drink oh drink
those liquid contours*

VI

they had not entirely gone
but I behold gazing upward at stars

find their names and sacred persons
known to me

Andromeda clung to a lock of my hair
I fled the dogs of Orion

the Boreal Crown cooled my temples
and the dark wing of Cygnus

VII

what else could be pleasure after
than to lie so
with every joint loosened
on the dry moss and the mind's
mooring in time's oceans flung over

these who are all film of memory
borrow briefly flesh and blood
for pleasure of consciousness
and tasting mine
spilled upon me a hundred hundred lives
as I lay palling

so did I know in one inhale
sunlight over a market in Sumer
among German hordes in fire-council boasted
kissed with a veteran's lips
the fallen out of Troy
trenches of Arras to fold bread
under and dust it, warming myself
old woman near a brick kiln

each life clear as a blister of the moon
floating on a spangled night lake

O man (then spoke a lingerer
who rested, portly, scorning, to one side)

*the knowledge of the dead is delible as kisses
ask me soon those questions that yet detain you*

*these unsubstantial echoes cannot ease
a burden they have not themselves suffered*

VIII

(he knew me infected with each of those loose lives
their memory and folly

sweet viruses, companions giving me audience
but no longing for winged words)

IX

But can one know the value of a life?

*Yes: by dying; then regretting
all you left unwritten. Harsher sentences*

are given those whose sacred work and days

of duty cancel one another, leaving the soul

as little spoken here as in its living house.

Me you see long-winded—do you know

who speaks to you now?

How can I know—alive—the sacred work?

*There are a thousand ways to be good men
for every fool who yelps in Tartarus.*

*All eras offers faultless disciplines:
choose by inclination. γνωθι σεαυτον,*

*but know that you will make your daily bed
where you are happiest to lie.*

Suppose I write “courageous” on a page
per day till death—but hide a soul cringing
under those slogans?

*That is damnation. Look again, to fear it.
Expect no comfort. All may be misled—*

*there are no good men, only better schooled
for life’s long tending.*

No good men? Can there be none
and no God listening either, but the poets
lark on into a void?

As they have always done.

(here he bowed his head)

*Are these the best
epigones today, who stumble at the dead*

and bleat so callow at a whiff of sorrow?

Why linger then to shame me?

(he hesitated; and his being grimaced)

A failing death did not divest.

*Even now I hope to prove that damned oracle
untrue, that called me wisest among men.*

(I knew him then and called him by name

he shifted on a buttock, nodded, and reclined)

Socrates ego. Speak again

X

Did you partake of that feast?

*of course: here we are beyond
hemlock and conscience*

*ask yourself what you would not do
on another's body if alone in time*

*and space, and she
approached you all in gauze and fear*

*what's ethics when all consequence
has happened? when your punishment's*

*good is behind you, every action's fee?
the dead know more of human quality*

than all live philosophers, I promise you

*some few dead hung back, and without envy
no, boy, I was not among them*

XI

now truly am I not of one mind
I questioned a man I had been in Athens

XII

I asked him to define Hell, and he replied
no discourse with another

and when I asked him of Heaven, next, he said,
no discourse with another

Monologues

I

The most terrifying of all the gods
is character. There is no Fate

here; your ghost is your essential nature
and all its postures now are fled

with the body that housed them. Here
you will face eternity with your true soul,

and it is not gazing forward into stars.
The infinity of Hell is retrospect,

each peevish gesture relived without
the complacency flesh always granted me—

seeing myself now as a character
I chose. There are no minor decisions.

The great are always those who feel
unutterable power over their own beings;

that folly's name is genius. What we endure
in life is the precise fruition

of our real wills, the selves we cannot know
till death, the bystander, makes our business plain

II

suppose me beautiful until, at ten
from some malignancy my knees turned outward

and brought my shoulders down; a cruel age
at best, with sexual joys imminent

until that cuff on the neck from a passing god
you might have thought: a not uncomely boy

curly maned, who would throw back at you
for some misdeed a proud and greedy smile

at some time I do not recall
I had to peer up at men through straining eyes

and as soft bones gnarled into a man's face
I turned hard away from beauty

for years thereafter it was my comfort to deny
the good of the body, but you know

every attacker of the beauty of the person
has been an ugly man; or would-be man

next I said, all things truly good
are truly beautiful; and all things beautiful

work to the good; the face is the sign
of the soul. I made men believe these things

even as they gazed at me. No one ever asked
how the ugliest spud in Athens and the wisest of men

could both be Socrates: I would have said simply
look again

III

would I have been happier
as my father's apprentice and eventual

replica? His devotional statues
came easily to my hand and gave

brief pleasure to the purchaser
and the exchange was simple: money

for an object many others made
well, or better. I believe in such candour

nothing in my prudish economy
made up for that moment of cleanness

he came home daily with a haughty tiredness
I envy even here, and a handful of coins

by which he fed his son and prepared
a decent grave. Where is the greater good?

I would like to imagine us both
artisans, that his little gods

had virtue, that the Forms too were clay
hardened in the family kiln

so that we might both have worked there
to the one end; but I find instead

his memory unmans me;
I do nothing yet to his satisfaction

IV

the flesh betrays so easily
and best of all in its disguise as *mind*

though I pleased in the body gluttonously
this does not torment me now—never think it

but using my mind ignobly, in nervous
procurement of the body's daily needs

Plato never said it, but I argued for money—
ate well to sit down on the benches of rhetors

how else do you suppose I fed a skinny
wife and built this paunch?

those are the indignities for which I loathe myself now:
not the different beds, nor the fruit I guzzled

so abundant I let its juices dribble down my bib
and then walked out from a rich man's kiss

into the traffic of vulgar Athens

V

the Greek mind of my time did not imagine
the first life to have a chance of peace

we made of that longing an Elysium
and settled into barbarity

of course there was Sloth, and most men had her
in her easily spreading robes

when they were not sunk deep in war
drunk with their neighbours, or as cruel as Sparta

get a Greek on an honest day and he will tell you

he stumbles from the bed of Sloth uneasy
but falls in battle with a steady mind

thus either men are at peace or the world is

peace was not among the words
I bandied with the chuckleheads in those days:

alone among men I found no solace
in military pleasures, nor had I children

by whoring Sloth. I was a little unhappy
from the dawn of consciousness at first lust

until I drank that small cup, I tell you:
no deeper than a servant's restlessness

and no more noble. Only on a stone
on a hot day with my legs out and robes open

and the schoolroom full and a forced idea
softening in the afternoon of talk

could I push that headworm of distress aside
and briefly snuff the fragrance of the forms:

all other times my body stank of need
and that, not brain-play, marked me as a man

VI

of course one lives in a bestial age
that is no reason not to do your homework
or to persist in greatness

(dilettante! you are hardly touched
by the grasp of atrocity on a Balkan child's wrist

but you cry *O bitter foul* if a Greek pundit
goes too cheap on the latest syllabi)

don't forget I was a soldier
I watched a pregnant slave girl disembowelled

and the fetus, harpooned on my fellow's sword,
hoisted human-like over a bust of Apollo

on whose sacred arranged curls
he dripped the double gore

two years later I was reasoning about justice
on a comfortable divan

the wine poured into my cup by another pretty slave
and I assure you, I thought nothing of it

very well: you would say my *Republic* is a lie
or you would say: the world was too fouled
for genius to endure: so he drank execution

but there: I lived
Plato wrote down the words (well, more or less)

and what would have been a man remained unborn
both of these are true

I see only one connection: that having been spared
in times of slaughter

I owed the gods a life

VII

do not be too much with the young
it is you they cherish
not the wisdom you earn for them

they believe easily, and kindly
and charlatans as readily as you

though perhaps there is no better pleasure than their praise

the edges of their desire are not sanded
and you can be briefly sturdy among them

that I should be accused of their corruption!
when daily I had to resist
their fast allegiance to my own ideas

on the last day only they were with me
their tears made me think a great loss
what I knew in fact for an irony

one was to keep my name alive
for two millennia—think of that—

another adjusted the pillow under my head
and threw a cloth over my legs

though when I said they were cold I meant
from the bone outwards

it would have been worse, surely, to die among old men?
I heard a voice among them say I was dead

that made their weeping easier to bear
though no one there understood my last joke

VIII

What, do you imagine
I ever had such interlocutors?
How convenient for the philosopher:
young fools wholly willing
to say yes, no, or “the cobbler”—
until their stupidity was so obvious
even they had to laugh and thank me?

IX

I accept the wisdom of the Athenian fathers
that I was a dangerous anarch

who had best be ostracized, but failing that
killed. Do not judge their ruling

as if I was Plato's cut-out among their sons;
I was no Christ in body or in person

or mind, but filthy on all counts
where great obedience is cleanliness

they say I wanted sex with many of my pupils
the truth is I learned to speak long while

gazing at their rapt expressions
as if their open mouths were saying yes

the body will not come to philosophy
so let pleasure be of all schools

you want your pleasures good
and your goods beautiful and your beauties
good and beauties pleasurable

in my mind these are great warring Gods

I spent a lifetime seeking a marriage
of Aphrodite and the Good
and found them such opponents
that my death became necessary
so the Greek incoherence could prevail

X

all nations delight in the full display
of the male in his aggression

the plumed helmets of the Achaeans
or slicked pectorals in the gymnasium

regalia so red the soldier's chaste
or nakedness, his abdomen stitched

only the Greeks admitted the beauty of men
could justify desire; but this did not throw boys

into drag—if I long for male curves
well then, I will lust upon warriors

why should a mincing boy making a *moue*
attract Achilles? when he wants weakness

and affectation he has many women
but Patroclus was for fucking with power

an equal mind, force atop force
a body bristling like his own with weapons

XI

Are you so sentimental? The theatre then
was in the hands of young thaumaclasts
so aroused by their own flaccid members
they strutted them upright on the public stage,
defiling the gods with mortal blood-lusts
and cutting raw jokes while Apollo's breeches
fluttered to his ankles. Should good men
stand quiet in the name of liberty when the name of justice
is scandalized? Poets work at the pleasure
of the priests, and if they will not, why,
a true republican *will* demand their banishment!

XII

Xanthippe was no shrew—
why have they said so?

I have known worse harridans
of whom *you* will never hear

to pinch the ears of great Athenians
right up to the Council doors!

It must be a thing in my own nature
that her life has been told at all:

my ugliness? my boasting of the Forms
Plato was to market? Either I was too wise

for the Greeks, or a pug brute
who hung about the sons of wealthy houses

and either man deserved, so it would seem
a vicious tongue for anecdote...

Like all good women she remained by day
stitching in her room, and if I blundered home

showed me her duty with her eyes cast down;
to the last she retained a girl's hope

that the vinegar and sweet soaking her olives
would please me; I confess, I let her see

my pleasure in sex. Only once did she outrage
my kindness, asking, "Surely the demagogues

would give you clemency before the day?"
as I leaped up she faltered in her gaze

and I forgave her then. Old woman
lived half a generation after me

and when we passed in these dark woods
the morning of her death she looked away

and would not know me. She is in Elysium
where no harsh women enter after life

but no one there will sit with wife or husband
(in every marriage only one is blessed)

XIII

Still, you know, when push came to shove
I thought of sex much less than was the fashion;
I yearned less for young lovers
than for the freedom of their persons—
the body stripped and reclining for my pleasure
always disappointed. It was clothes, I think,
not flesh, I longed to penetrate.
It follows that Alcibiades was right,
that I did not desire, as I thought,
beauty in younger men; only an admiration
so extreme they would shame themselves naked
into my bed and I could turn away for a good sleep

XIV

why did I so loathe those jobbers
that I forced them soon enough to destroy me?

I had taught Athens to imagine
a possible Republic, whose Guardians

spurned all trappings: elders who had sped
their generation well in battle and famine

and their choice of promising *kouroi*
whose supple merit would keep open the ways

to history. I expected her now to listen
as every man will *be* good who *sees* good

remember? I paced the Assembly stones
and acquitted myself irrefutably

before those clot-polled pillars of the *polis*;
not a word I wasted on their ears

but was poetry of a better kind
in its direct, unguarded utterance of my soul

and to louts who had taken to themselves
the custody of Athena Parthenos!

who used the tissue of her sacred robes
to wipe the grease from their lips, the sperm

from their boys, the tarnish from their silver;
and when I saw their jeering gratitude

I longed to do them a great malice in my turn
so did I propose my punishment for loving Athens

too well: a pension from the state!
knowing the rump that might have spared my life

would swing the other way and cast black stones
favouring the death of the apostate

yes, I surrendered a few senile years
but the Athenians spilled their final greatness

and democracy shat her innocence—so be it
for forty years I'd fended off grave sins

I longed to joy in; and they fouled the gods' offices
on a whim—and it pleased their balls—

great strength is available to all! we must be prepared
to make the weak suffer for their greed!

XV

the kinds of revolution are many
not all great freedoms are died for
in a state governed by universal betrayal
it is enough to play the obedient servant

to bring down anarchs and their gods
live in the quietest possible neighbourhood
speak only to those who venture to your table
refuse every form of power; eat gravely

not once did I intend a threat to Athens
but—having been executed on that charge
I was as powerful a dictator in death
as if I had raised a banner so to be called

throughout my seven decades men took up small arms
against the Attic order; and when each
poor thug was taken off and piked
the citizens grew fonder of the laws

but when my dust began its drift
across the Mediterranean on the winds of Plato
the Greek *polis* instantly was doomed
a match in the night against a thunderstorm

I who had liked only to talk terms
with ambitious men on the wrong side of power

XVI

You might suppose Hephaistos my particular
patron—a broken-footed castoff
kiln-worker who mended what the gods in whimsy made
of base metal, or faulted; or Hermes, courier
from the hoar latitudes of Olympus to the fast
gates of Athens—no. In sudden keen
need it was Ares, blood-soaked, first
father who slapped bronze onto my breast
and cried out at my trial *kill and kill*

XVII

first of all, it was a hymn and not a poem
I tried my hand at. I never said

one should not laud the gods
and anyway, I had a swift ship's round trip

to live: would you hold a man to his aesthetics
even at pain of death? Look: the God said, *Socrates*

*we ordered you to the highest of the arts—
have you chosen well these forty years?*

yes, I said, then doubted;
that has always been my method

so I handled the old stylus
until its heft was well among my fingers

and then sang my praises to Athene
(more or less trite) and after to Apollo

as god of light—poet in him be hanged!
there was business about grey eyes

and that disdainful mouth; I had heard elsewhere
some such trash; then I thought of the Sun

I had seen only muddled through iron bars
that fortnight, and I scribbled on the third night

“light of the highest good upon my eyes”
and wept at my good fortune

to father such a word before my death
though I found nothing equal to frame it in

no gold sheet worthy of that gem—

when Crito came to tell me the Delian
tribute ship had made Piraeus

I sent him for Xanthippe, and burned my scrolls
in the last hoarded drops of oil

if my life has been a grand error
lit up by that small image burning on the grate

no one need know. Soon after came the boys
looking for a last quibble; I gave them

a grasp on immortality, then took my death-bath
with Homer's laughter washing out my ears

XVIII

I have spent two dozen centuries in Hell
and this of which you ask has been my chief reflection

therefore prepare yourself: here is the final truth
I have reasoned out beyond the banter

of older and younger men and the gibbering
of dead friends. No, it is not possible

to die great in a great cause
if you will not sacrifice to the gods

reputation, wife, comfortable shelter
or shame, mistress, a beloved hovel

to the least and briefest victory:
one poem, an accord on Justice, a murdered

servant of the hated king. I too resisted
this absurd idealism: tried to raise sons

in virtue, keep a happy wife,
stand decent surety to friends condemned

but made these efforts heartlessly
much as I tried to borrow good clothing

or clean myself with lavish succulents
to ease the *amour-propre* of wealthy friends

it never mattered. Voices in debate
were to me as instinct with desire

as the puckered lips of a young girl are
to the lonely pedant

once my wife was beaten by a creditor
while I heckled a Sophist in the Agora

I regretted her shameful face all of my life
but could not have done otherwise

we act in these regards by forceful inclination
and after death will find, merely, ourselves

great or deluded. Take no comfort from failure
the obscure are rarely significant; the significant

not always obscure. From this you can know
nothing to the point of your question

I died a minor gadfly in a fading local empire
having made small headway in the reason of men

and am now among the few you see spared
the general facelessness of Hell

but you, my friend, might die the equal death
give yourself wholly to the purpose of the god

drain that cup to the green sediment
and still be no one here

be indeed Socrates, in every giftedness
and still be no one when your legs go cold

XIX

if it were up to me I would live again in Attica
and take the punishment I took, the servitude

military and political, all obligations. It is fanciful
and futile to imagine other lives

anything else is better, and therefore
nothing is. Anyway, at last we settle

into the rhythms life has made habitual
philosophical or otherwise, and hold our tongues

Epilogue

I

Thus I lost his voice: I boistered him
to a last question

he considered briefly while gazing
into the middle distance, where some unknown light

played in the arches of a small temple
and then turned toward me, confident of time:

*I detested men; each day was a torment to me
to hear their vulgar cries, watch them hawk*

*corrupt wares to one another, cast down
small birds to tear away their holy wings*

*I might have spent my life weeping; instead I grew hard
and feigned innocence and clubbed them*

*with my brains—sudden darkness veining through him
he shrugged at me and turned his face away*

when he looked again his character was gone
and echoing in the air between us

the whole of his life beaten upon me
now passing as I forgot each word

I gazed in a great longing as that knowledge faded
down at my forearm; but my wound was healed

II

his was the last of those ghostly lives
to slip from my tongue

when I lost his voice
I lost that perfect audience
desiring which I found my way to Hell

now I stood alone in my own person
a horrid singularity of selves
and memory terminal
the skin closed again
and the single thread spooling within

what is it to have spoken with the dead
so well that the living give you no ear
who then to prepare
the gentlest of dialogue

symposia among a dozen friends
whose long-forgotten injuries
bleed from your moving pen

when I lost his voice
I lost for good the will
to speak on men's behalf
to men

III

light was sifting into all solid things
the grove around me dawned, and like a fog

upon dawn, lifted: the sunken rocks and the
trees that split them thinned as the warming air

opened through them, and beyond
sunlight dizzied that fraying world—

the condensing outline of a great city
blew across the middle hills

gave bone to the air around me
and I grew damp in those sudden walls

as Hell faded I settled into my chair
the darkness closed swollen and sirens

opened their bloody song in my ears
while the pounding of earthly music

drove away memory of the dead's grace;
a great mingling of grinning souls

strobed with a lurid light
filtered into the glances I threw

from a round table on a back wall below stairs
I gaze out through the felt darkness

and vast windows to a street in late
sunlight where now indistinguishable

figures pass before me, carrying or seeking
objects and desires I cannot articulate