

Interpretation

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The Music of Reason—as Michael Davis explains, the title of his book is a puzzle, for music and reason are customarily opposed, as suggested by Socrates’s reference to an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry. Generally speaking, reason and philosophy aim at clarity in both speech and thought; music and poetry, on the contrary, delight in willful ambiguities. “The measure of reason is the true; the measure of music is the beautiful” (191). So understood, “the music of reason” appears to be a contradiction in terms: the irrationality of reason. This appearance, however, is called into question by the idea of the Greek Muses, goddesses who inspire the minds of men. The Muses illustrate that human insights often seem to strike one from without, like a bolt out of the blue: otherwise rational thoughts have mysterious grounds. A thorough understanding of human reason requires an account of its foundations: “what grounds *logos* but for that reason cannot ever be taken up into *logos*” (10). In *The Music of Reason*, Davis seeks to provide such an account, thereby illuminating the ways in which the rational aspects of human nature (e.g., language, science, and philosophy) depend on the nonrational or musical (e.g., melody, art, and poetry).

But how can one speak reasonably about that which grounds *logos* and is thus, in an important respect, unspeakable? Faced with this paradox, Davis takes up three philosophic works: Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, and Plato’s *Lesser Hippias*. As supremely poetic philosophers, Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Plato are profoundly aware of the complex relation between music and reason, as well as “the irony of

challenging the adequacy of speech in speech” (11). Using a variety of poetic devices, each in his own way provides an account of that which cannot be said. Davis elucidates their accounts by carefully interpreting these works. His book contains three separate essays, one devoted to each work, unified by the guiding question: “What does it mean that music and reason are at once at odds and ineluctably fitted together as a pair” (12)?

Fittingly, Davis prefaces his inquiry with “Prelude: Music and Reason.” After first proposing that reason has a musical foundation, Davis examines an apparent counterargument, Socrates’s critique of poetry in book 10 of Plato’s *Republic*. On its surface, Socrates’s argument suggests that poetry and philosophy are fundamentally opposed. Davis, however, highlights the ways in which Socrates’s critique of poetry is itself poetic, concluding that philosophy cannot simply dispense with poetry. Davis’s observations regarding Socrates’s rhetorical slide from *eidos* to *idea*—which exemplifies “the idealizing at the heart of all *logos*” (3)—are particularly thought-provoking. But one might nevertheless object that not all philosophers have accepted this proposed wedding of philosophy to poetry. In response, Davis considers two apparently prosaic philosophers, Aristotle and Descartes, and demonstrates that each is far more poetic than he initially appears.

Having thus established his theme, Davis begins the main inquiry with part 1, “The Music of Language,” which examines Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origins of Languages* (subtitled *Where Something Is Said about Melody and Musical Imitation*). This examination is guided by three related questions: How does the single natural origin of human language yield many conventional languages? How does the question of language, and so the origin of political life, relate to music? And why does Rousseau repeatedly present logical relations as though they were temporal relations? Davis discovers the answers to these questions in a tension inherent to language, arising from its double structure: first, language communicates the self as a subject to a subject; second, language articulates an object in the world. On Davis’s reading, Rousseau’s essay is an attempt to spell out the problematic unity of this dual function of language: “This necessary togetherness of communication and articulation is the thread that ties *The Essay on the Origin of Languages* together” (22). Davis delineates this thread, revealing thereby the musical foundations of language and thought.

Part 2, “The Music of Poetry,” consists in an interpretation of Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*. Making up over half the book, this interpretation ranges from reflections on the details of Nietzsche’s writing (e.g., his use of

punctuation) to broader considerations (e.g., his tacit engagement with Hegel). Davis understands the overarching question of *The Birth of Tragedy* to be: What is the force behind thinking? Here, the music of reason first appears in the duplicity of the Apollonian and Dionysian, fraternal drives whose tension expresses the duplicity within *aisthēsis* or perception. According to Davis, “Nietzsche means not to attack science but to spell out its hidden truth—that it is grounded not in *logos* but in *aisthēsis*” (76). Thinking that undertakes to justify the world with an understanding of the duplicity of the aesthetic would constitute Dionysian philosophy. “The issue of *The Birth of Tragedy* is finally the nature and possibility of Dionysian philosophy...Nietzsche means not to bury reason but to praise its deepest form. This is what it will mean to call for a ‘music-driven Socrates’” (57). While providing an account of the musical grounds of poetry, Davis thus lays bare the underlying argument of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

In part 3, “Poetry and Language,” Davis turns to Plato’s *Lesser Hippias*, where Socrates presents a paradoxical defense of lying, in response to Hippias’s claim that Odysseus was most “versatile” (*polutropos*). Davis begins by noting a number of perplexities about the dialogue, to which he adds a curiosity: the first word of *Lesser Hippias* is the second person singular pronoun “you” (*su*). Why might this be? Davis’s interpretation again focuses on the dual function of language as communication and articulation, as well as the necessary obscurity of the self—the hidden “you” referred to by the first word of the dialogue—which entails that the *polutropos* soul can never appear as what it is. Davis discerns a connection between this obscure self and the ambiguity inherent to *logos*, a connection between agency and poetry. Ultimately, Socrates’s defense of Odysseus as *polutropos* comes to light as “a defense of a mode of philosophy that is necessarily indirect in its approach to the most important questions, a defense of Platonic philosophy” (166). This amounts to an account of how poetry tells lies like the truth: “Plato articulates indirectly, which is to say musically, an account of the necessarily musical character of all *logos*. The dialogue is a poetic account of poetry” (163). In addition to its interpretation of *Lesser Hippias*, part 3 includes a number of illuminating reflections on relevant sections of the *Iliad*. Davis concludes his inquiry with “Coda: Musical Reason,” which compares the works of Rousseau and Nietzsche, on one hand, with Plato, on the other. In the end, Davis suggests that Plato’s manifest playfulness may make him the more serious practitioner of the music of reason.

In the course of explicating these works, Davis addresses matters of fundamental philosophic importance. Davis's inquiry is motivated by the desire for self-knowledge: given that man is a rational animal, self-knowledge requires a thorough understanding of reason; and this, Davis argues, requires an understanding of the necessarily musical character of all *logos*. Such an understanding entails an implicit critique of any so-called philosophy that attempts to purify itself of imagery and related poetic devices. The idea of philosophy purified of poetry is itself a poetic ideal. Relatedly, tensions inherent to *logos* so understood set limits on human knowledge. As Davis remarks in a particularly striking passage: "An enlightenment is ever accompanied by a darkening; what is brought into the light must cast a shadow. This would be tragic were it not possible to shed some light on the character and necessity of the shadow cast" (192). For human beings, whose souls are constituted by the tensions inherent to *logos*, self-knowledge requires perceiving the shadows intrinsic to reason—in other words, knowledge of ignorance. Such knowledge may be the truest experience of the underlying unity of the human soul, "which must always conceal itself in its attempt to show itself and reveal itself in this very concealment" (47).

Although the foregoing may suffice as an overview of *The Music of Reason*, it nevertheless misses what is distinctly valuable, as well as enjoyable, about Davis's work. Davis has a unique ability to reveal the poetic devices employed by authors, hidden in plain sight, and to explain how these devices are integral to the philosophic meaning of their works. That is to say, Davis is extraordinarily sensitive to the necessary connection between form and content—which is, in a way, the point of *The Music of Reason*. I will limit myself to one example. In part 2, Davis discusses the differences between the 1872 edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* and the 1886 edition. Among other things, the later edition includes a new foreword, "Attempt at Self-Criticism." As Davis explains, this new foreword serves the same purpose as the prologue in Euripidean tragedy, foretelling what will happen, an inevitable failure. This observation not only complicates Nietzsche's apparent criticism of Euripides, but it raises a question regarding the status of Nietzsche's own work: Might the true paradigm for tragedy reborn be the 1886 edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* itself? *The Music of Reason* is filled with such intriguing observations and suggestions—regarding details of grammar and vocabulary, peculiarities of chosen examples, and the significance of literary references—all of which serve to deepen one's appreciation of these works by revealing their hidden dimensions. This infuses Davis's work with a particular delight, that of an artist, one who delights not only in the meaning uncovered, "but also in the

fact and in the way that it was covered up” (129)—a delight in the beauty of the form, as well as the content.

In his Coda, Davis concludes that “Plato reasons musically and lovingly about the tension between music and reason” (194). A similar compliment could be paid to Davis himself. Marked by theoretical playfulness, his book is not only about the music of reason but stands as a paradigm thereof. One consequence is that, like a good conversation, *The Music of Reason* has the power to inspire the reader’s own thoughts. I was particularly inspired by the questions posed regarding the relation of *Lesser Hippias* to *Greater Hippias* and the puzzle of the first word of *Lesser Hippias*: “you.” It struck me that the fundamental problem of *Greater Hippias* concerns the noble, understood specifically as the praiseworthy, and the way in which praiseworthy things are often, in a certain sense, bad: noble things are difficult. Accordingly, the dialogue begins with Socrates praising Hippias, “Hippias, noble and wise”—not noble and good. The first word is Hippias’s name in the nominative, not the expected vocative, highlighting Hippias’s desire to have a “name” among the many, his desire for praise. The problem of the noble and praiseworthy is thus hidden in the opening words. Given this, perhaps *Lesser Hippias* should be understood to concern the converse problem: the shameful, understood as the blameworthy, and the way in which shameful things are often, in a certain sense, good. This problem is epitomized by lying, which is shameful and blameworthy, yet beneficial. Accordingly, *Lesser Hippias* begins with Eudicus blaming Socrates for his silence, and the first word is that which is used to blame another directly: “you.” Although the focus of this interpretation differs from that of Davis, the two interpretations may be harmonious: direct blame is a striking example of the dual function of language emphasized by Davis, insofar as what one is attempting to articulate—the blameworthy person—is the same as that to whom one is attempting to communicate.

As I hope these reflections make clear, *The Music of Reason* is a wonderful book, overflowing with insights and inspiration, which must be read to be fully appreciated; for, as Davis notes, “if a poem were to admit of a fully adequate interpretation in clear and distinct prose, why would we need the poem at all?” (191).