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The Dream of Socrates, or Theory and Literature in the Strip Club (A Love Story)

Going mad in prison, Socrates is suffering from a recurrent nightmare in which a voice persistently tells him, "Socrates, practice music" (*Birth of Tragedy*, 92-93). His life, his death, his philosophy, and the entire legacy of Western thought to follow all hang in the balance of this dream vision.

What Nietzsche exploits in *The Birth of Tragedy* is the uncertainty with which Socrates pronounces his severe judgment of art and literature. He banishes artists from his ideal Republic, but "as people who once were in love with somebody, if they believe their love to be no good to them: they don't want to give it up, but they must" (*Great Dialogues of Plato*, 408). The dialogue – in fact, the entire collection of dialogues that comprise *The Republic* – ends with an aesthetically wrought allegory, leaving open the question as to how philosophy should relate to its abandoned lover. Nietzsche turns the question on its head, postulating: "Perhaps there is a realm of wisdom from which the logician is exiled? Perhaps art is even a necessary correlative of, and supplement for science?" (93).

Instead of embracing Socrates' uncertainty vis-à-vis art, theory today is eager to promote an image of interdisciplinary thought when in fact it aims at co-opting and replacing the literature it claims to explicate. In English and Comparative Literature departments across the world, the study of literature is becoming increasingly replaced with the study of the theory of literature. After millennia of disparaging literature as other, as insane, as threatening, theory is itself – from Socrates onwards – the threatening insanity it is so terrified of. To be daring in academia, one is expected to advance or create new theories. But what is more daring yet is to rescue literature from the domesticating, sanitizing, and constraining clutches of theory.