

# Introduction to the Transaction Edition The Genesis of Winspear's Thought

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Asked to write a brief introductory note to the reprinting of *The Genesis of Plato's Thought*, I thought first of trying to summarize Plato scholarship in the intervening 70 years. But obviously that would require too much space to do well, and anyway there are quite decent resources available for those who want to learn that story.<sup>1</sup> But who was Alban D. Winspear? The most frequent adjective attached to his name in the literature is "Marxist," though the name of Marx appears only once in the text of *Genesis*, on p. 240, suggesting that some may see Plato's system of government as anticipating Marx. Perhaps he won that description by interpreting the social and political philosophies of Socrates and Plato as the consequence of the historical conditions within which they were developed. It has never been very surprising to learn that Plato's *Republic* expresses profoundly anti-populist views. Winspear's *Genesis* can be distinguished from the several other works<sup>2</sup> that critique Plato's politics in its generous appreciation of Plato's commitment to the philosophic life and profound understanding of the intellectual divisions occasioned by the social oppositions in effect in his day. Indeed, it is hard to read Winspear's work without coming to admire his thorough scholarship and commitment to fairness and generosity.

Alban Winspear was born in England in 1899. His parents brought him and the rest of their family (two sisters, two brothers) to Canada in 1910; they lived briefly in Calgary, then settled in a rural location, 40 miles from Calgary, named Namaka, where they attended a one-room schoolhouse.<sup>3</sup> Alban went on Bishop Pinkham College

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in Calgary and Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario; he won a Rhodes Scholarship, and attended Corpus Christi College in Oxford, studying Literae Humaniores (Classics and Philosophy). He returned to Queen's for a couple of years, then moved on to the University of Wisconsin in 1930, as associate professor of classics.<sup>4</sup> In 1935 he published his *Augustus and the Reconstruction of Roman Government and Society*,<sup>5</sup> with the University of Wisconsin Press, giving some of the authorial credit to his post-doc student, Lenore Kramp Geweke.<sup>6</sup> In this work, Winspear argues that Augustus tried to preserve continuity with the Roman Republic, and to establish viable administrative parameters.

In 1939 Winspear published *Who Was Socrates?* with Cordon Co., New York.<sup>7</sup> He gave credit in this work to a graduate student, Tom Silverberg.<sup>8</sup> The distinctive Winspear thesis in this work is that Socrates, in the earlier part of his career, had distinctly democratic sympathies, but as time went on, became more and more supportive of the moneyed classes and aristocracy.<sup>9</sup> Of course, this line of thought was taken a good deal further by I. F. Stone's 1988 work, *The Trial of Socrates* (Anchor), but the idea that Socrates was executed for his aristocratic sympathies is an idea that goes back to antiquity, as indeed Winspear points out in this book. In 1960 a second edition of *Who Was Socrates?* was published by Russell & Russell. It continues to be cited, usually favorably, by students of Socrates. Perhaps the most sustained opposition to the Winspear type of interpretation of Socrates' political views comes from Tom Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith in *Socrates on Trial* (Princeton, 1990). The disadvantage of the Brickhouse and Smith approach is that Plato's *Republic* Socrates turns out to be a bizarre misrepresentation, while Winspear can happily maintain that this is the Socrates that Plato knew well.

*What Was Socrates?* was quickly followed, in the next year (1940) by *The Genesis of Plato's Thought*, published by the Dryden Press. An enlarged edition, including an exploration of Plato's later works and the political activities of the Academy, appeared in 1956; it was reprinted again, by Harvest House in Montreal, in 1974. Winspear spends a good deal of time tracing the impact of ancient class divisions on the development of various philosophical movements preceding Plato. In both books the application of Marxist analysis to social situations that don't fit classical Marxist concepts inevitably gets a

little creaky at times. To put the creakiness as simply as possible, Marx developed his economic and political analysis in relation to early to mid-nineteenth-century society, when England and some other countries had developed capital-intensive factory production, with large numbers of wage-earners working in the factories. Marx analyzed the ongoing struggle between the owners and the workers. At the same time, Marx recognized that in antiquity there was little capital-intensive production; the social tensions were fundamentally between those who owned relatively more land, and those who owned little or no land. Winspear, in order to get some sort of Marxist twist to his analysis, has to appeal to the existence of an incipient bourgeoisie, already in possession of a bourgeois consciousness; he then has to appeal to Plato's aristocratic sensibilities to explain his opposition both to the excesses of the demos, and the threat of the mercantile class.

During the Second World War, Winspear visited Swarthmore College a couple of times,<sup>10</sup> and became director of the Abraham Lincoln School in Chicago. In the "Cold War," the Abraham Lincoln School became a lightning rod for the House Un-American Activities Committee.<sup>11</sup> When Winspear left the Abraham Lincoln School, in 1945, Paul Robeson was one of the speakers at the testimonial dinner.<sup>12</sup>

As one suspected of being a Communist, Winspear was unable to find a job in higher education either in the United States or Canada. He is recorded by Rhodes Scholar index of 1945 as "writing." We next see him purchasing the nearly defunct North Shore College, a private boy's school, in North Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1947.<sup>13</sup> (He is described as an "elderly gentleman" by the historians of Vancouver, although he was just 48 at the time.) By 1956 the school had gone broke; in 1957 the main building was burned down to give practice for firemen.

In 1955 his translation of Lucretius *de rerum natura* appeared, with the subtitle, *The Roman Poet of Science* (Harbor Press). It's a fine translation, but now somewhat forgotten as several other good translations have appeared over the past half-century. Winspear's book is recognized as enthusiastically favorable to Lucretius' scientific perspective.<sup>14</sup>

At some point following the publication of the Lucretius book, Winspear turned his attention to the use of the computer in analyz-

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ing classical texts. Apparently the first fruit of that was an article in which he collaborated with M. Levison and A. Q. Morton in analyzing Plato's Seventh Letter (*Mind* 77.307 (1968) 309-325). In the following two years, he was the recipient of two Canadian grants for computer analysis of classical texts; all of that resulted in the 1971 work, with Andrew Morton and others, *It's Greek to the Computer* (Harvest House, Montreal).

Alban Winspear died in 1973, at the age of 74. At the time of his death he was working on a book on the early Christianity; it appeared posthumously in 1976, under the title *The Emergence of the Christian Church*, from the University of Calgary Press, edited by Elise Wittig.

We should say something about some of his close family members, since it will give us some perspective on this remarkable scholar with an indelibly "leftist" reputation. Alban's beloved sister Mary Winspear earned her Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Toronto in 1942 and taught at several Canadian universities for the remainder of the war. At the end of the war, teaching opportunities for women became increasingly scarce; Mary bought a girl's school in Montreal, known as the Weston School, in 1946, and remained as its owner and director for 25 years. In that role she pioneered teaching students in both English and French, depending on the subject matter. She was always close to her younger brother Francis, and on retirement went to live with him on Vancouver Island.<sup>15</sup>

So it's time to say something about Francis Winspear.<sup>16</sup> Alban Winspear's younger brother became an accountant and rapidly rose to the top of his profession. Francis Winspear was, in the course of his career, president or CEO of 19 companies, controlling an international network of some 40 corporations. He also taught accounting at the University of Alberta, making it an important center for the study of accounting. Francis donated six million dollars for the establishment of the Francis G. Winspear Centre for Music in Calgary, one of the premiere venues for opera in North America.

Francis Winspear had two sons; one of them, William, was also very successful as a businessman:

Educated at the University of Alberta, Mr. Winspear ... was president and CEO of two Canadian firms, then of Chaparral Steel Co., which brought him and his family to Dallas. In 1984, he founded Associated Materials Inc., a Dallas manufacturing company he headed until his retirement in 2002.<sup>17</sup>

In 2000, William and his wife Margo:

combined a \$200,000 inheritance from a cherished aunt, Mary Winspear, with \$800,000 of their own to provide a \$1 million gift to rebuild Sanscha Hall, a performance centre erected during the 1950s on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada, on the north end of the Saanich Peninsula. The hall is now known as the Mary Winspear Community Cultural Centre at Sanscha.<sup>18</sup>

William and Margot Winspear donated a great deal of money to many intellectual, medical, and cultural enterprises, both in Texas and Canada, most notably \$42 million to build the Dallas Center for the Performing Arts Margot and Bill Winspear Opera House, which opened in October 2009.<sup>19</sup>

If you are asking, “Why have you told me all of this?” the answer is really simple: I have applied some aspects of Alban Winspear’s methodology to my study of his own intellectual work. We ask ourselves, what is the historical location of this work, in terms of the political and class location of its author? And we may be just a little puzzled to find that a reputedly Marxist interpreter of Plato, director of the Chicago Abraham Lincoln School in the last years of World War II, is the brother and uncle of spectacularly successful venture capitalists. Or perhaps not? For what characterizes the whole Winspear family is commitment to education, culture, and philanthropy. Perhaps Alban Winspear’s interpretation is inspired not so much by Marxism as by a spirit of generosity; he finds in Plato a philosopher with much to be admired, but severely lacking in that spirit of generosity which so much inspired Winspear himself, and those to whom he was closest.

### Notes

1. Richard Kraut, 2009, “Plato,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato/>> provides a “standard” view; his bibliography includes several alternative approaches. See especially C. Rowe & M. Schofield, eds. 2000, *Greek and Roman Political Thought*, Cambridge, for recent contextualization of the sort of historical approach pioneered by Winspear.
2. Homer Smith, in his 1952 *Man and His Gods*, cites as those who have destroyed Plato’s reputation as an ideal philosopher: Will Durant 1926 *The Story of Philosophy*; Warner Fite 1934, *The Platonic Legend*; Benjamin Farrington 1939: *Science and Politics in the Ancient World* and Alban D. Winspear 1940: *The Genesis of Plato’s Thought*. Online at: <<http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/homer1a.htm#TOC>>. Today’s students would be surprised that he did not include Karl Popper 1945, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Although Plato has had plenty of defenders over the past 60 years, even the most ardent Platonists would shudder at a potential establishment of Kallipolis in our own time.

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3. Information from the biography of his sister Mary on the site sponsored by the cultural center named for her: <http://www.marywinspear.ca/index.php?centre=who-was-mary-winspear>.
4. Information from the official Rhodes Scholarship records, 1945.
5. Available online at <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=252964>.
6. Ms. Geweke went on to campaign for teaching Vergil to second-year Latin students, rather than Caesar. I acknowledge my debt to her for this; one of my Latin teachers had been persuaded by her to change her own methodology.
7. Available online at <http://chss.montclair.edu/english/furr/socrates/>, hosted by Grover Furr of Montclair State University. Furr's introduction is quite informative.
8. Tom Silverberg went on to practice medicine in New York City.
9. Possibly the liveliest review of the book was written by Henry Luce in *Time Magazine*, May 1, 1939: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,761154,00.html#ixzz0cbUR0glA>.
10. This according to the official Rhodes Scholar record for 1945.
11. Testimony in 1949 at HUAC cites Winspear as the person to see to sign into the school: [http://www.archive.org/stream/testimonyofjames1949unit/testimonyof-james1949unit\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/testimonyofjames1949unit/testimonyof-james1949unit_djvu.txt).
12. [http://marbl.library.emory.edu/findingaids/content.php?el=c01&id=blackprintculture921\\_series3](http://marbl.library.emory.edu/findingaids/content.php?el=c01&id=blackprintculture921_series3).
13. [http://www.dnv.org/upload/documents/District\\_History/56503K.pdf](http://www.dnv.org/upload/documents/District_History/56503K.pdf).
14. Giovanni Reale critiques this aspect of Winspear's comments on Lucretius in *A History of Ancient Philosophy: The Systems of the Hellenistic Age* (SUNY, 1985), pp. 194-195.
15. Information from the biography of his sister Mary on the site sponsored by the cultural center named for her: <http://www.marywinspear.ca/index.php?centre=who-was-mary-winspear>.
16. [http://apps.business.ualberta.ca/eerkut/old\\_template\\_files/francis\\_g.htm](http://apps.business.ualberta.ca/eerkut/old_template_files/francis_g.htm).
17. From an extensive obituary published in the Dallas News when William died in 2007: [http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/obituaries/stories/DN-winspearobit\\_0612gl.State.Edition1.172f06f.html](http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/obituaries/stories/DN-winspearobit_0612gl.State.Edition1.172f06f.html).
18. <http://www.marywinspear.ca/index.php?centre=why-were-we-named-the-mary-winspear-centre>.
19. Information from the Dallas News obituary, already cited. Brief information about the opera house is perhaps most conveniently available on the Wikipedia page: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margot\\_and\\_Bill\\_Winspear\\_Opera\\_House](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margot_and_Bill_Winspear_Opera_House).