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Protagoras, Gorgias and the Dialogic Principle

J. K. NEWMAN

When Protagoras published the *'Αλήθεια ἢ Καταβάλλοντες* [Λόγοι], his title looked like a gesture of the most blatant cynicism.¹ This was not the only evidence to support such an accusation. He was also the author of the *'Αντιλογίαι*, and the theme of the two books of this treatise, we are told, was that, on any given question, arguments of equally compelling logic could be advanced both for and against. In that case, "truth" as something objective—a concept familiar even to such a non-philosopher as Pindar²—appears to be completely destroyed. It is in this sense that a passage in Euripides' *Bacchae* (200–03) is often interpreted, where we learn that long established things are not overthrown by any *logos*:

¹ Indispensable older treatments of the Sophists remain: M. Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, tr. K. Freeman (Oxford 1954); W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* III (Cambridge 1969). More recent work includes: F. Solmsen, *Intellectual Experiments of the Greek Enlightenment* (Princeton, New Jersey 1975); C. J. Classen ed., *Sophistik, Wege der Forschung* 187 (Darmstadt 1976, with full bibliography); G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge 1981); idem ed., *The Sophists and Their Legacy*, *Hermes Einzelschriften* 44 (Wiesbaden 1981): cf. especially Professor Kerferd's introduction (pp. 1-6), "The Future Direction of Sophistic Studies." The great merit of Professor Solmsen's book is to handsel the topic of the history of ideas in the fifth century. Obviously a *Geistesgeschichte des 5. Jahrhunderts* (in English!) is sorely needed. This study will heal the quarrel to which Plato refers (*Rep.* X. 607b), for in it the poets and particularly Pindar, so often dismissed as no thinker, will play an essential role.

² *'Αλάθεια* was first made a goddess by Pindar, according to M. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* I (2nd ed., Munich 1955), p. 748: cf. U. Hölscher, "Pindar und die Wahrheit," in *Wandlungen: Studien zur antiken und neueren Kunst* (Munich 1975), pp. 90 ff.

οὐδὲν σοφίζομεσθα τοῖσι δαίμοσιν.

πατρίους παραδοχάς, ἅς θ' ὀμήλικας χρόνῳ
κεκτήμεθ', οὐδείς αὐτὰ καταβάλλει λόγος,
οὐδ' εἰ δὲ ἄκρων τὸ σοφὸν ἤρρηται φρενῶν.³

The artistic point—again familiar from Pindar—is that Truth is unveiled by Time,⁴ and that if something is long established it must therefore have enhanced—even unchallengeable—claims to be true. Comforting though this doctrine might be to poets who professed to eternize, and to their patrons, it was evidently denied by the apparently new and outrageous implication that everything remained always an open question (*δισσοὶ λόγοι*).

Although the charge of “ethical relativism” and of a general assault on received values is so often brought both against Protagoras and the Sophists as a whole, it is of course too simple to believe that the thinkers and teachers who descended on the heart of the Greek world from its periphery in the later years of the fifth century were nothing but iconoclasts. Both Protagoras and Gorgias had quite respectable philosophical credentials. Sicily, the forcing-ground for new ideas, had inherited the problems of the well established Italian Eleatic school of philosophical skepticism about claims to know. Zeno of Elea was credited by Aristotle (fr. 65 Rose) with being the founder of dialectic. In Protagoras’ native city of Abdera, Democritus too was an Eleatic. It was in this tradition and in reaction to Parmenides that Gorgias had begun as a philosopher before he turned to the study of rhetoric, and thereby forfeited, according to E. R. Dodds, his claims to be a “Sophist” at all.⁵

³ Murray’s text seems superior on the whole to that printed, for example, by Jeanne Roux, *Euripide, Les Bacchantes* (Paris 1970), although I have accepted her *καταβάλλει* in line 202, already weighed by Dodds *ad loc.* In considering the style of Euripides, Aristotle’s remarks (*Rhet.* III. 1404b24–25) can hardly be over-emphasized. In line 200 *σοφίζομαι* is constructed with a following dative, by a bold extension, as if it were *μάχομαι*: cf. the motif of *θεομαχέω* in the play (vv. 45, 325, 1255). The asyndeton at 201 marks the speaker’s emotion as he utters his solemn declaration of faith. There is nothing inadmissible in colloquial style about the resumptive *αὐτὰ* at 201. It is not merely *καταβάλλει* which encourages one to think about Protagoras here, but that verb allied with *σοφίζομαι* before it and *σοφόν* following.

⁴ Cf. *Ol.* 10. 53–55. The long history of this motif is discussed by F. Saxl, “Veritas filia temporis,” *Essays Presented to E. Cassirer* (Oxford 1936), pp. 197–222; E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (repr. New York 1972), pp. 73 ff.

⁵ *Plato, Gorgias*, ed. E. R. Dodds (Oxford 1959), pp. 6–7. Contrast Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, p. 45 and note.

Aristotle was unsympathetic to history, as the ninth chapter of the *Poetics* shows. Is it perhaps the reading of Aristotle which convinces the modern student of ancient philosophy that "style" in his discipline has nothing to do with content? Obviously, no one could derive this opinion from reading Plato! And, even in the case of his disciple Aristotle, everyone understands at least notionally that what we have from him is only part of the record, lacking the *aureum flumen orationis*. How much one would give, for example, to read the *Περὶ Ποιητῶν*! But, if Albin Lesky is right in suggesting that Thucydides deliberately echoes Protagoras⁶ in introducing the first pair of contrasting orations in his History, that between the Corinthian and Corcyrean ambassadors at Athens, what has to be admitted is that a "Sophist" and alleged skeptic about the truth handed to the greatest of ancient historians, one who claimed that his work would be an everlasting treasure precisely because it offered access to the truth (I. 20–22), a basic tool of historical analysis, the speech and counter-speech. Is not this already a philosophical achievement of the highest order, and one that makes a refreshing contrast with the *Poetics*? And the *form* of these speeches is moreover in debt to Gorgias!⁷

Obviously twin speeches occurring in real life called for the judgment of an audience. Set now in the record, thesis and antithesis have to be synthesized by the reader for himself. But this evidently lends another interpretation to Protagoras' doctrine of ἀλήθεια. It was not after all blatant cynicism, but an emphasis on the dialogic principle which his work proclaimed, however much it may have been misinterpreted by Euripides (as Euripides was misinterpreted himself, for example by Aristophanes⁸).

The dialogic principle states that all dogmatic and would-be final formulations are betrayals, and hence the importance to it of the term ἀπορία already found in Pindar (*Nem.* 7. 105: cf. Eur., *Bacchae* 800), and another proof of the modernity of the world in which he moved. There is only, for the seeker after truth, the ἀγών, which may take various forms, and eventually becomes the presentation of a particular point of view by a speaker aware of its partiality, and the courteous wait for an opponent to develop his reply (but not, of course, his refutation). In Thucydides, by what the Formalists would call a *dénudation du procédé*, this technique (which explains why his speakers echo one another's phrases) is eventually manifested in the

⁶ *Ἀντιλογία*, 31. 4: cf. Lesky, *History of Greek Literature*, Eng. tr. (London 1966), p. 476.

⁷ See especially Solmsen, pp. 83 ff.

⁸ *Hippolytus* 612: cf. *Thesm.* 275, Arist., *Rhet.* III. 1416a29–35.

so-called "Melian Dialogue," otherwise such an anomaly in the structure of the History.⁹

This pre-Platonic, historical use of dialogue form by Thucydides shows certain typical features. The "courteous wait" to which allusion has just been made is evident at V. 86: ἡ μὲν ἐπιείκεια τοῦ διδάσκειν καθ' ἡσυχίαν ἀλλήλους; the concern with truth at 89: τὰ δυνατὰ δ' ἐξ ὧν ἑκάτεροι ἀληθῶς φρονοῦμεν διαπράσσεσθαι; the seriousness of the topic at 101: ἀγῶν . . . περὶ . . . σωτηρίας. Clearly we are confronted with a "threshold" situation, quite literally a matter of life and death, which deploys for judgment an argument about a religious and ethical question: do the gods protect the just but weak cause, or is might right? The resemblance of the Athenian case to positions attributed to Thrasymachus in the first book of Plato's *Republic* is clear.

It is part of the genre (as old in fact as the Book of Job) that no satisfactory answer is stated. The Athenians behave exactly as they intended all along. The Melians are defeated, the men murdered, the women and children enslaved. If the story of the Sicilian Expedition which begins the next book is the proof that the gods do after all avenge the right, that is small consolation for the Melians, and in any case a conclusion that we must draw for ourselves. All we can observe here and now is the character of the participants.

Sophistic elements have been noted in the Hippocratean corpus.¹⁰ The dialogic form used here by Thucydides quite independently of Plato is also illustrated in the novel of Hippocrates, the first epistolary novel of European literature,¹¹ the first with an ideologue as its hero (Democritus, the "laughing philosopher"¹²), and interestingly, an exploration of madness. The dialogic form could be used then as heuristic and empirical, a tool to grasp at rather than fix an elusive truth. Democritus symbolizes the absence of "seriousness" in this quest, which does not make it frivolous, since seriousness may be

⁹ Yet subtly integrated by W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton, New Jersey 1984), pp. 147-57. Thucydides shows such familiarity with the idioms of the dialogic style that a careful examination of his *History* for more hidden ("estranged") features of it would clearly be rewarding.

¹⁰ Cf. Kerferd, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58.

¹¹ For an indication of its contents, see Diels-Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (repr. Berlin 1974), II, pp. 225-26. It should obviously be taken much more seriously as a literary and philosophical phenomenon than the commentary implies. Its alleged lateness, for which linguistic evidence is a very uncertain guide, is no proof of its unimportance, and it is glossed by Maloney and Frohn (see below, note 13) with the rest of the corpus.

¹² Cicero, *De Orat.* II. §235, is especially relevant. Cf. Diels-Kranz II, p. 28, no. 81.

inapposite to the last things. Perhaps all one can do at the end is laugh.

Democritus, with Leucippus the author of the atomic theory, was like Protagoras a native of Abdera, and like Gorgias an Eleatic. Abdera was normally thought of as the city of fools, and yet his laughter evidently was compatible with the most committed interest in philosophical truth. Whatever the date of the Hippocratic Novel, it has symptomatic value. It shows that ultimately it was plausible to credit the Abderite Democritus with having inspired in the medical science of his day both a method and a literary form—but for exploring foolishness, madness.

It is tempting to suppose that the Abderite Protagoras did the same thing for history, for the madness which was the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides was certainly interested in abnormal states of mind. Cleon symbolized the negation of the Periclean ideal of wise statesmanship, and his "mad promise" to capture the Spartans on Sphacteria is described by a Hippocratic word (IV. 39, *μανιώδης*).¹³ Naturally, in spite of the epic thrust of his narrative, and of the many battles he describes, the rationalist Thucydides avoids the *μαίνομαι* which is so common for "blood lust" in Homer's *ἀριστέαι*. But at this juncture in his narrative, when rationality appears to have failed, he tellingly uses on a unique occasion about Pericles' ape Cleon (he echoes Periclean language, as has been often noted: cf. II. 63. 2 and III. 40. 4, *ἀνδραγαθίζεσθαι*) a piece of medical terminology, of which there are five examples in Hippocrates.

The historian's interest in *σύνεσις* may also be seen in this context. Themistocles is praised for his possession of it (I. 138. 2), but it is a quality which cannot save Phrynichus (VIII. 27. 5). It plays a great role in Diodotus' answer to Cleon (III. 42). *Συνετός* occurs four times in Hippocrates, and *σύνεσις* fourteen. *Ἄσυνετος* is both a Heraclitean (I and 34, Diels-Kranz) and a Hippocratic word.

This complex of ideas also explains *τὸ ἄφρων* at V. 105. 3, an accusation brought by the Athenians against the Melians, and a token of topsy-turvy values in a context showing Sophistic influence.¹⁴ There are ten examples of *ἄφρων* in Hippocrates.

Ἄνοια, of which there are two examples in Hippocrates, is another important concept. Democritus had already condemned it as a civic

¹³ The examination of Hippocratic vocabulary here has been greatly facilitated by the five volumes of the *Concordance des Oeuvres Hippocratiques* by Gilles Maloney and Winnie Frohn (Montreal 1984).

¹⁴ Kerferd notes (p. 112) the anticipation of Plato's *Gorgias* 483e3 at Thucydides V. 105. 2.

vice, and praised its opposite.¹⁵ At II. 61 (*πολλὴ ἄνοια πολεμῆσαι*) Pericles uses the word in this Democritean way to suggest that, though normally war is folly, it is the only course now open to the Athenians. Later, Diodotus in the speech already mentioned uses it to dissuade the Athenians from following Cleon's advice about the Mytilenians (III. 42 and 48. 2). Both these arguments are reasonable enough. But in V. 111. 3 the Athenians warn the Melians against the *ἄνοια* of rejecting their proposals, and in Book VI, Alcibiades both uses *ἄνοια* about himself (16. 3; 17. 1) with a kind of boastful bravado, and later at Sparta describes the Athenian democracy as *ὁμολογουμένη ἄνοια* (VI. 89. 6). Cleon has won, in spite of Diodotus. In Alcibiades' parody of the Funeral Oration of Pericles, the world of moral discourse has been turned upside down. We can see both the terrible decline from the earlier part of the story, and the paradoxical proof of the rightness of this description of the modern democracy in Alcibiades' own career.

The debt to Abdera and Protagoras suggested by this internal dialogue culminates in Book VIII, where the complete absence of speeches has long been noted. But this silence is a profoundly significant gesture. As madness deepens, the dialogic principle is totally denied. How little this is understood by those who insist on dividing form from philosophy, and philosophy from historical analysis, and all three from the Sophists.

Thucydides' family owed its wealth to Thracian goldmines, and his acquaintance with Abdera may easily have been gained firsthand. His interest in medical terminology is well attested. But it looks as if he found in Ionian medicine not just terminology but a method of diagnosis. In fact, the Abderite and Protagorean dialogic form evinces a primitive principle of thought deeply embedded in the most elementary Greek way of approaching the world, as the national fondness for *μέν* and *δέ* clauses shows. At the level of action, it shows itself in the preoccupation with what J. Burckhardt calls "das Agonale," but in the Greek case, never the solitary wrestle of Jacob with the angel in the wilderness, but the witnessed rivalry of champions for a prize. The Games channelled these rivalries into a stylized alternative to (not preparation for!) war, and of course competitors wanted to win. Yet it is not the winning which the vase-painters, for example, typically show us, but the contest.

The Games also provided a rich source of imagery for literature. Even here there was mutual interaction between *λόγος* and *ἔργον*. Pindar, as concerned as Thucydides and Plato after him with character,

¹⁵ Fr. 282, Diels-Kranz II, p. 204.

explains the role of the poet in holding up a mirror to the deed, in seeing, in providing witness.¹⁶ It is not surprising then that they became also the venue for pamphleteers and publicists, for a war of words. And should not as much attention be given to those words as athletes gave to their bodies? Gorgias, who had noted that his countrymen found poetry immensely persuasive, sought to lend the same poetic persuasiveness to prose, and with this, prose too entered the realm of the ἀγών. But this agonistic prose itself bore the marks of its intent. Even its insistence on antithesis, pariosis and homoeoteleuton may now be seen, not as decoration for its own sake, but as yet further underscoring of the dialogic principle.¹⁷

One of the great strengths of the Greek genius is that its flowers never lost contact with its roots. A recent study for the non-specialist remarks of the history of Greek philosophy in general:

Two lessons can be drawn from this example [Epicurean physics], which are crucial to the interpretation of Greek philosophy. First, its dialectical character: Greek philosophy is primarily a dialogue or argumentative encounter, not only between contemporaries, but also and perhaps more interestingly, with thinkers of the immediately preceding generation. The questions which a philosopher tries to answer are typically raised by his dissatisfaction with theories that are currently on offer. Aristotle's philosophy is in large measure a critical response to some of Plato's most ambitious theories. In order to assess the interest of Aristotle's ethics or metaphysics, we need to consider both his arguments and the dialectical context in which they are placed. Aristotle himself makes this very plain, but it is a point that applies no less strongly to other Greek philosophers whose work is less well preserved. As summarized in ancient or modern handbooks the cut and thrust of philosophical argument, responding to real or imaginary opponents, too easily turns into a catalogue of doctrines. . . .¹⁸

¹⁶ Ἑσοπτρον, *Nem.* 7. 14. This is also St. Paul's word: NT I Cor. 13:12. This religious concept demands a separate monograph. Μάρτυς too is a religious idea, also found in the seventh *Nemean* (49). We already noted ἀπορία in this densely textured ode (105). It was the reaction of Herod to his conversations with John the Baptist: ἡπόρα, NT Mark 6:20. But they were nevertheless enjoyable (ἠδέως, *loc. cit.*). In the concept of the "Zuschauer" Greek vases (see K. Schefold, *Götter- und Heldensagen der Griechen in der spätarchaischen Kunst* [Munich 1978], p. 272) and Pindar come together: cf. *Pyth.* 9. 26 ff. and, in general, J. K. Newman, *The Classical Epic Tradition* (Madison 1986), pp. 233–34.

¹⁷ And his insistence on composing encomia of the most trivial or challenging objects shows that he had not forgotten (any more than Erasmus did later) the element of make-believe and fun which that genre implies.

¹⁸ A. A. Long in *The Greek World*, ed. Robert Browning (London 1985), pp. 102–03.

The dialogic principle persisted into the most sophisticated philosophical explanations of cosmology. Parmenides' motionless universe of Being and Not-Being was differentiated and paradoxically reconciled by Heraclitus' "Love" and "Strife," and by Empedocles' *ρίζωματα* ("roots" or elements). "Dialectical materialism," itself a reaction to Hegel, has made our century familiar with these notions in a way far from theoretical. But they have in fact certain implications for philosophical form, since the primitive consciousness could not by definition handle abstracts. This is already shown for Western Greek thinkers like Parmenides and Empedocles by their choice of medium: not the prose of Ionia, although even there Eduard Norden noted in Heraclitus certain strivings towards artistic polish, but the hexameter of Homer and Hesiod. Empedocles indeed, although the intent of his work puzzled Aristotle, merits from him the highest praise as an artist, and passed as the "founder of rhetoric" (Diog. Laert. VIII. 57). At the same time, Empedocles was a mystagogue and wizard ("shaman") of a primitive and extraordinary kind, provoking hostility as well as admiration, as the opposite reactions to him of Lucretius and Horace still attest.¹⁹

Some of these formal implications may be listed here:

1. Time is not apprehended in the dialogic complex as a sequential series, but as a dimension of space ("vertical time"). There is only *now*, and everything, past and future, is available in the present. This primitive concept, when driven to extremes, explains Parmenides' insistence on the impossibility of change.
2. Yet primitive man is all too aware of change. He solves his problem by his practical observation of nature. The child is father of the man, the acorn is already under the woodman's gaze an oak. At an elementary level, this means that metamorphosis is a valid and even dominant conceptual mode.²⁰ Everything carries with it the map of its own past and future, and this map may be scanned now by the discerning eye of the wise.²¹

These modes persist into more abstract formulations. Empedocles answered Parmenides by his doctrine of four roots moved by Love and Strife. Aristotle followed this ultimately biological model, when he argued that the *δύναμις* is present to the entelechy to govern its development.

¹⁹ *De Rer. Nat.* 1. 729-33; *Ars Poetica* 463-67.

²⁰ Cf. J. Burckhardt, *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* (4th ed., Berlin-Stuttgart 1902), pp. 5-18, "Die Metamorphosen." The Pythagorean metempsychosis and Empedocles' various avatars (fr. 117, Diels-Kranz) attest the same concept.

²¹ Cf. Empedocles, fr. 129, Diels-Kranz I, p. 364.

3. Primitive societies like to assist the not so discerning eye however by the wearing of masks.²² The mask de-individualizes the particular, and emphasizes, though not of course intellectually, the universal. The mask, and the mime or ritual action in which masks or disguises of some sort are deployed, are important tools of primitive thought, and evidently for the Greeks led on to comedy and then to developed drama of the kind we know in Athens. But Athens was not the only center of some kind of performances, and we are told that, sophisticated thinker though he was, Plato was a devotee of the mimes of the Sicilian poet Sophron to such an extent that he slept with them under his pillow. The mime, like all dramatic performances, finds the truth *between* its characters. It also finds the truth laughable, and this idea too, the ancestor of both Democritus' Eleatic skepticism (and Abderite foolery) and the Socratic irony, is important for Plato.
4. A certain kind of suspended time is privileged, because this mentality has no interest in the time of the (as yet non-existent) mechanical clock (Bergson). These are the times which signal change, momentarily caught as it were in the act; festivals of various kinds connected with the harvest, with the enhancement of the tribe that comes from eating, drinking, sex: in more refined parlance, the symposium; the funeral ("wake"), and its annual commemoration at the grave; the wedding and the acceptance of new members into the clan.
5. We saw under (3) already in the case of the mime that a certain kind of reaction to the perception of change is privileged, and that is laughter. This happens even in the face of what to the refined sensibility looks like "tragedy," since tragedy, at least in its purest form, is the transitory invention of quite advanced urban societies like fifth-century Athens and seventeenth-century France (and even in fifth-century Athens the tragic trilogy was normally followed by a "satyr" play to redress the balance). Laughter, which may be stylized in that special type of ritual known as the game, must be understood as anything but dismissive. What is laughed at is meant to be preserved and saved. This is easily seen from Aristophanes' gibes at the society of his native Athens, or the Roman satirist's gibes at Roman life and manners. In this sense, the inconclusive ending of the game of words ("dialogue") is part

²² The rich material assembled by Katerina J. Kakouri, *Πρόιστορία τοῦ Θεάτρου* (Athens 1974), deserves the closest study.

of its very essence.²³ Only the man with no sense of time wins, or rather thinks he has won.

6. Certain kinds of space are privileged, in particular, the public square or circle, often situated before the door or threshold, because that is the space through which access is available to the numinous. This is why games and feasts have often been held at tombs, or in churchyards, and why the theatre has such close connections with religion, even in its physical form. Later, as religious awareness fades, the numinous degenerates into merely the unknown. But perhaps even the unknown may best be approached through the game, and in this context the student of literature must remember Huizinga's remark that every verse form is a form of play.
7. Truth (in so far as it is legitimate to introduce such an abstract into this discourse) is polysemous, and is grasped musically (Pythagoras) or polyphonically. "Sophist" meets us for the first time in Greek with the meaning "musician," "lyric poet" (Pindar, *Isth.* 5. 28), in an ode which also emphasizes the value of λόγος. Herodotus calls Pythagoras a sophist (IV. 95), and in view of later developments it is interesting that we are told elsewhere (Cicero, *Tusc. Disp.* V. 8-10) that Pythagoras abandoned the claim to be wise, and instituted instead the claim merely to "love wisdom," i.e. to approximate, but asymptotically, to the desired goal. It is not the correspondence of some statement with "reality" which determines whether an utterance is true or not, since reality is too fluid a concept to be immobilized in this way. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, itself a rediscovery of a Heraclitean and Platonic position,²⁴ would in any case rob any reality so immobilized of its objectivity. Rather, the *coherence* theory decides what is true. This is another way of saying that Time decides. Does the allegedly true statement fit the experience of the tribe, fit the contours of a four-dimensional *now*? This primitive adherence to the established truth explains the reaction of the astronomers who refused to look through Galileo's telescope. Of course they were obscurantists. But perhaps they were also conscious of how much that was important would have to be surrendered in order to gain the trivial knowledge that Jupiter had moons. How often did even the greatest of the Greeks fail to look through that telescope! If the

²³ Beautifully caught by Tacitus, *Dialogus* 44, *cum adrisissent, discessimus*.

²⁴ Cf. Werner Heisenberg, *The Physicist's Conception of Nature* (London 1958), p. 60.

truth is what "cannot lie hidden" (a-leth-eia),²⁵ it is not we but the nature of the historical process itself that best produces reliable knowledge ("science"). Such an attitude is by no means hostile to experiment, but it mistrusts the experiments devised in any laboratory except that of the witnessed, public *ἀγών*.²⁶

Although Plato so often signalled his hostility to the concept of a mobile and shifting truth, paradoxically it is now possible to understand certain formal features of his work, including both his use of verbal repetition, already, as we noted, evident in Thucydides (it is another form of vertical time), and the "dramatic" element (which is simply another version of the dialogic). The *Republic* is said in fact to have been contained almost in its entirety in Protagoras' *Antilogica*.²⁷ In that case, how interesting that the first book, for example, contains a number of details commonly regarded at best as picturesque, and at worst as utterly irrelevant to the serious business in hand—"philosophy," interpreted however by an understandable but inexcusable modern dogmatism as if it were *sophia*.²⁸ It may now be seen that these details are essential clues to the intended meaning.

The first of them is the occasion, the feast of the Thracian (!) goddess Bendis, held at the port of Piraeus, as it were the "gateway" to Athens. The celebrations will resume in the evening with an equestrian *ἄμιλλα* symbolizing the game of life,²⁹ but they are suspended for the moment, while Socrates and his friends seek respite at old Cephalus' house. This is a waiting ("threshold") situation.

²⁵ "... dans certaines conceptions philosophiques ἀλήθεια est opposé à Λήθη 'oubli' . . ." (P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* III (Paris 1968), p. 618).

²⁶ See *Reflexivity: The Post-Modern Predicament* (London 1985) by Hilary Lawson and his important article in *The Listener*, vol. 115, no. 2948 (20 February 1986), pp. 12–13, "The Fallacy of Scientific Objectivity," with reference to the work of Simon Schaffer. The conference chaired by Mr. Lawson at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in March 1986 was entitled "Dismantling Truth: Objectivity and Science." The resemblance to Protagoras' Ἀλήθεια ἢ Καταβάλλοντες is striking. But of course the aim of the conference at least was to establish new insights into scientific method. Heisenberg's treatise (above, note 24) continues to be relevant.

²⁷ Diog. Laert. III. 37 and 57. Cf. Kerferd, p. 139.

²⁸ Julia Annas, for example, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford 1981), sees only a picture of "complacency" (pp. 16 ff.). But this is to misunderstand the genuinely religious nature of Cephalus' remarks about ἀγαθὴ ἐπίς (on which F. Cumont, *Lux Perpetua* [Paris 1949], has a whole appendix, pp. 401 ff.) and his quotation from Pindar at 331a. He echoes in fact themes of *Ol.* 2. 53 ff. If Polemarchus had been judicially murdered when Plato was writing, had not also Socrates? This theme serves to emphasize the "threshold" nature of the *mise-en-scène*, its fragility and at the same time its privileged access to the truth rather than its complacency.

²⁹ *Quasi cursores vitae lampada tradunt*, Lucr. II. 79.

Cephalus is a metic (one who has "changed his home"), he lives at a harbor, with its constant comings and goings, and he talks about his imminent death, describing himself as "on the threshold of old age." He is only in conversation with Socrates from the threshold of another activity, since he must be off to perform certain religious duties. He evokes in his remarks a well-attested complex of traditional religious ideas.

Plato has then already hedged his dialogue about with certain quite clearly indicated limitations, tokens of its "transitory" nature. Into this dialogue eventually intrudes the figure of Thrasymachus, who betrays his ineptitude by his failure to understand dialogic conventions. He abuses Socrates as a child, instead of recognizing the privileged status which the child enjoys in the primitive community (the "divine child"; Heraclitus had understood this concept when he represented Time as a playing child, Diels-Kranz I, p. 162. 5). He insists on delivering a long monologue, which is meant to establish an incontrovertible, and therefore unavailable, truth. Of course, he must in his turn be shown up as a clown, and that is why Plato permits himself to poke a certain fun at his red face and sweaty embarrassment (350d).

The most important use of dialogic symbolism however is reserved for the end (354). We are carefully reminded that it is still the *Bendidia*. Plato makes Socrates compare the previous conversation to a meal at which he has snatched up this dish and that, without however being able to say that he has satisfied his appetite. But this unsatisfactoriness, this self-uncrowning by the hero, for which he has been so often scolded, is the essence both of Socrates' "irony" and of the open, dialogic manner. We cannot expect any final resolutions in the nature of things. It is precisely the imagery of the meal which is used by the philosophers to encourage us to face death (Lucretius, Horace, Seneca).³⁰ But death is the most unsatisfactory of all our arguments, because we can never win it, and yet eating is our only approximation to victory. This is why Priam and Achilles learn an accommodation with death over a meal, and why the *Iliad* ends with a funeral feast. The presence of the dead at the annual celebration of their deaths with the *rinfrasco* is another part of the same skein of ideas.

In the case of the ending of the first book of the *Republic* the

³⁰ Lucretius III. 938 (cf. E. J. Kenney in his edition of this book [Cambridge 1971], pp. 212 ff.); Horace, *Satires* I. 1. 118-19 (where see Kiessling-Heinze's note), *Epp.* II. 2. 214; Seneca, *Epp.* 61. 4: in general, B. P. Wallach, *Lucretius and the Diatribe against the Fear of Death*, Mnem. Supp. 40 (1976), pp. 64-65. Horace's *rideat* is telling: *Epp.* II. 2. 216.

argument (conducted of course by the now dead Socrates) is not so much at a banquet as identified with it. Like all these dinner debates, it remains unsettled. In another sense, we may think of Thrasymachus and Socrates as two contestants in a duel (and of course sometimes that element was bodied forth in other circumstances and societies in an actual combat before the assembled guests, even at the doors of the tomb). But none of these occasions can ever end finally. In spite of the duel between Thrasymachus and Socrates, a vital question is "left on the table." How are we to live our lives? Only the post-mortem "journey of a thousand years" can answer: and how revealing it is for Plato's cast of thought that, when the good man has won out at the end of that endurance test, he goes around collecting his prizes like a victor in the Games.³¹

It is the business of the intervening books of the *Republic* to make this dimension actual, so that we can *now*, as we pick up the text, hold the answer quite literally in our hands.

There is then nothing discreditable about the first book of the *Republic*, if we will attend to its form rather than merely to its arguments. The ultimate challenge is not logical at all, but *ethical*, which (to recall an earlier part of our argument) is another way of saying that not the correspondence but the coherence theory of truth determines the result ("time will tell": it is the demand shortly to be put at the beginning of Book II). This is why the *character* of Socrates is so important to Plato. No one acquires his character overnight, yet precisely such a telescoped embodiment ("incarnation") of the truth is required by this style. It would have been invidious for Plato to advance himself as some sort of ideal fusion of wisdom and life in his own work. But he can advance such a fusion in the person of a revered master, and this is the symbolism of the inheritance of the argument from old Cephalus by those whom he leaves to carry on the discussion, and of Socrates' role in articulating their doubts and puzzles. At the same time, by concealing himself behind the mask of that master, Plato is able to shrug off any responsibility for the ultimate truth of what is dialogically said. This "shrugging off" (most visible at the start of the *Phaedo* (59b), a "threshold" dialogue *par excellence*) is a kind of laughter (irony), laughter at the seriousness of the claim to the absolute.

It is now possible to understand why Aristophanes' comedy the *Ecclesiazusae* shows such extraordinary resemblances to certain arguments of the *Republic*. Usually, Aristophanes and Socrates are taken as opposites, and the one is sometimes thought to have contributed

³¹ X. 621d: cf. J. Adam's note on V. 465d.

to the end of the other. That can only have been because the Athenian state had lost its sense of proportion, and of what an Aristophanic comedy means. Part of the purpose of Plato's *Symposium*, at which both Socrates and Aristophanes are guests, is to remind forgetful Athenians of their dialogic good manners, and, because this reminder is already too late for the feast, that contributes immensely to the dialogue's tragedy-in-comedy, emphasized by Plato at the end. But Utopia is a regular comic theme (borrowed also by the Sophists), the double of our present society held up like a mirror to magnify and mock our shortcomings. When Plato held up the same mirror as Aristophanes, he had the same comic or satirical intent. Which of them spoke first in this dialogue matters much less than realizing that Plato too is deploying a comic ("ironic") apparatus.

Aristophanes shows that an essential and primitive part of comedy is the assault on other literary men ("false prophets"), which is why literary satire is such an enduring genre. It is part of the *Republic* too. But we have to understand that, in Plato, the mixture of prose and verse is not just the technique of the scholarly article, quoting a source in order to comment. The motley look of the last pages of Book II and early pages of Book III of the *Republic* is already a heuristic device, a way of giving utterance to two voices that anticipates the Menippean satire, or Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. Homer or Aeschylus is not after all silenced in this court. As in the case of Thucydides' pairs of speeches, the argument must be settled by the jury, and the jury is the individual reader.

In Book X of the *Republic* Homer comes under attack because he both imitates what is bad, and because imitation is bad anyway. Here (596d), the image of the mirror used by Pindar proudly about his own komic art, and boldly adapted by Alcidamas to defend the *Odyssey* (Aristotle, *Rhet.* III. 1406b12), is interpreted *in malam partem*. But the paradox by which a master imitator condemns imitation must not escape notice. It too is part of the denial of ultimate truth, or better, of human access to ultimate truth in words.³² Can Gorgias' youthful declaration of the incommunicability of knowledge be so far away?

Plato was not stopped by this inaccessibility any more than Gorgias from exploring what transrational language could do to break out of the philosophical impasse. He argues in the *Republic* that what we think of as reality is really a shadow world, a flickering copy of the hidden truth. In another striking image, he recalls Glaucus from the sea, encrusted with weed and shells, to picture for us the soul

³² Cf. Letter VII, 341c; *Phaedrus* 275e ff.

overgrown with this life's desires and pleasures, and utterly transformed from its real nature. This poetry condemns our perceptions of normality as corruptions or metamorphoses of a second and superior world, precisely therefore a distorting mirror of the true thing. It is only because the poet's mirror of this mirror is bigger and more insistent than our lazy, routine looking that at long last we begin to notice something is wrong.

This is the essence of the comedian's art. It is appropriate in an essay so much influenced by M. Bakhtin to draw an example from Russian literature. Both in *Dead Souls* and *The Inspector General*, N. V. Gogol does exactly the same thing as Plato, and the motto of the latter masterpiece is the Russian proverb "Don't blame the mirror if your face is crooked." Gogol was the literary ancestor of Dostoevsky. But, if he helps us to understand in what sense Plato's mimic and comic art absorbs and outdoes the schematic dialectic of Protagoras, he also secures recognition for Gorgias, and recovers for Gorgias his claim to be a Sophist. The Russian writer was famous for his recitals of his own works, and for that attention to word-play and euphony which we associate with the Gorgianic tradition, in this case mediated to Russian literature through Byzantium. But the profound desire of the author of *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* (1847) to influence through his art the morals of his countrymen cannot be disputed.

We spoke earlier of Gorgias' philosophical beginnings. His early work in this mode advanced three propositions: that nothing exists; that, even if something did exist it could not be known; that, even if it could be known, this knowledge could not be communicated to others.³³ On the normal calculus, Gorgias' subsequent turning to rhetoric looks like an abandonment of these positions, or even worse, another motive for cynical exploitation of ethical relativism. If knowledge is impossible, why should not the prize go to the best guesser? Why not, if guesswork is all we mortals can manage?

Plato rebelled against this, even though Isocrates defended it as, in politics at least, nothing but common sense. Interestingly, Isocrates was, after Thucydides, Gorgias' most impressive disciple, and his influence in practical politics is attested by Cicero (*De Or.* II. 94). Once again, we have the same paradox as with Protagoras. His *'Αντιλογίαι* possibly inspired the Novel of Hippocrates, but they certainly, or so at least it appears, handed Thucydides an extremely sharp tool of historical analysis. And Gorgias' apparently empty

³³ Sextus Emp., *Adv. Math.* 7. 65-87.

preoccupation with mechanical figures,³⁴ what the Formalists call "sound gesture," and abandonment of the claim to absolute knowledge gave rise, through Isocrates, to a school of practical politicians and men of action. How could such barrenness bear such progeny?

The answer is that, if truth is unknowable and incommunicable, human society is not left entirely resourceless, and least of all Greek society. Truth indeed is lost to abstract methods of recovery, yet it is interesting that the statement that truth is unknowable only seems matter for despair to an audience which has lost, or is beginning to lose, its roots. To the religious and primitive man it is a commonplace, accounting for the importance in his mentality of mystery, and for the essential obscurity or masked nature of myth. It is only in late antiquity that handbooks of mythology appear. The truth that is unknowable may nevertheless be approached through indirection, by what theologians call "apophatic" definition, and "apophasis" may explain the paradoxical nature of Gorgias' own philosophical statements, as well as the poetic nature of his stylized prose. There was a way to approach the unknowable, and that was through the irrational spell exerted by poetic discourse. This is why Gorgias developed his theory of artistic prose after all as a *philosophical* gesture.

In primitive societies, truth may be approached through myth, and that myth may be remembered in some sort of ritual discourse, eventually in poetry. This is not a second best. What is second best is the bloodless abstraction. Primitive realities are too important to be disembodied in this way.

We can already see here a reason for Parmenides to write in verse. Although he dismisses Not-Being as inappropriate to or ineligible for rational discourse, verse enables such discourse to hint even at the transrational, and therefore to establish a dialogue with what otherwise would be unsayable:

τῶι πάντ' ὄνομ(α) ἔσται,
 ὅσσα βροτοὶ κατέθεντο πεποιθότες εἶναι ἀληθῆ,
 γίγνεσθαί τε καὶ ἄλλυσθαι, εἶναι τε καὶ οὐχί,
 καὶ τόπον ἀλλάσσειν διὰ τε χροῶν φανὸν ἀμείβειν.

³⁴ However it should be noted that the Gorgias of the phrase *σχήματα Γοργία* was probably the teacher of Cicero's son in Athens (*Ad Fam.* XVI. 21. 6), who wrote a book on the *σχήματα*, partially preserved in Latin translation. See especially Quintilian IX. 2. 102; the article by Münscher in *RE* VII. 2, cols. 1604-19; and Schanz-Hosius, *Römische Literaturgeschichte* II, pp. 741-43. The expression is not definitely attested before his time. In this sense the opening pages (15-16) of E. Norden's *Antike Kunstprosa* need refinement, since the activity of the younger man, who was nothing but a rhetorician, has obscured the understanding of the Sophist, who was far more.

But does not this magnificent passage (Diels-Kranz I, p. 238, fr. 8, vv. 38-41) already say something about nothing? And is that legitimate simply because we have to understand that verse has special rights? And must we not understand this also of Plato's prose poems?

Empedocles answered Parmenides in verse because a prose answer to the verse of the master would have been unsatisfactory, empty. The intended level of dialogue is too primitive and too profound for prose, especially in the mouth of a mystic. His two poems "On Nature" and the "Purifications" may be thought of as antithetical presentations of two sides to the description of the world. In one sense, it is possible to set out the truth in a form accessible (but not too accessible, as we see from Aristotle's remarks about Empedocles in the *Poetics*) to everyone. In another, such a truth is useless to the impure and unprepared.

Yet Parmenides was said by Speusippus to have established laws for his fellow citizens³⁵ and, on top of his shamanism, Empedocles was also a politician, an enemy of the Emmenid tyranny at Acragas. He cannot have supposed then that his wisdom was of a purely abstract kind, in spite of its formal, hieratic, beauty, which might in fact have secured him an attentive audience, had he been unconcerned with practical consequences, from a monarch like Theron, for whom Pindar wrote the second and third *Olympians*. Earlier, the disciples of Pythagoras, the mathematician and musician, were credited with the political takeover of certain communities. It seems therefore that Athenian public opinion was right. When the Sophists, particularly Gorgias, with his Western Greek tradition, but also Protagoras, who was to draw up a constitution for Pericles' colony at Thurii, arrived in Athens, they did have the intention of doing more than deliver a course of lectures and leaving. They were the heirs of the Pythagoreans, of the Eleatics, of Empedocles, and they meant to impinge on political ideas, and this is why the young and ambitious flocked to them: but impinge on these ideas through what should not so much be called rhetorical as dialectical training, which would have to be content with guesswork, *στοχαστική, δοξαστική, εικάσια*.³⁶ Pindar praises the trainers to whom his young victors owed their successes, and here were new trainers for new *ἀγῶνες*. Their immediate conversion of no less a historian than Thucydides not just to a style but to a theory of truth proves the impression they made.

Attic vases give evidence of the social world in which young

³⁵ Diels-Kranz I, p. 218, 18-19: cf. p. 220, 20-23.

³⁶ Cf. Thuc. I. 138 (and Cicero, *Ad Att.* X. 8. 7); Isocr. *Or.* XIII. 17; Plato, *Gorgias* 463a.

aristocrats, the destined targets of this *Kulturkampf*, felt at home: the *komos*, the drinking party, athletics, horsemanship, *eros*. The *Symposium* of Xenophon unites some of these themes, and it is interesting that the company is entertained there both by the *γελωτοποιός* Philip, and by a troupe of dancers, who present an erotic mime. Yet the dinnertable conversation is concerned with ethics, and nothing incongruous is perceived about this combination.³⁷ Xenophon was concerned to present a portrait of the dialogic Socrates in action, in exactly the kind of milieu which the Sophists frequented.

Precisely the same is true of Plato in his *Symposium*. Certain comic features of the two dialogues are in fact shared. Like Philip, Socrates arrives late. So does Alcibiades. At the end, so does a group of *κωμασταί*. There are threshold ("at the door") situations, mixed emotions. Both dialogues resort to myth.

Plato also indulges in literary satire, significantly at Gorgias' expense.³⁸ In the philosophical effort to grasp the nature of Eros, eloquence naturally takes wing. What is there here with which Empedocles could have quarrelled? But we can perhaps see the whole nature of Plato's war with the Sophists as an effort to beat them at their own game, and that is why they must so often be represented as bad characters bad at dialogue, unfairly, because dialogue was their mission. The common man, as Aristophanes' *Clouds* shows, viewed Socrates himself as a Sophist. His effort to differentiate himself was in the first place, at least as Plato presents it, an effort to prove that they had not understood their own epistemology.

A truer account of the Sophists would, in giving them credit for their public and political interests, also praise them for their attention to the word, the faculty which, according to Isocrates, distinguishes man from the animals.³⁹ But the Sophists were not just interested in their own word. In the verbal *ἀγών* no one side can claim to be wholly in the right. An ideal dialogue evidently depends on the acknowledgment of this moderation. Aristophanes' nerve failed even before the Peace of Nicias, and this is why the *Clouds* ends with such an ugly parody of dialogue, for which the poet invents a special verb.⁴⁰ After the defeat in the Peloponnesian War, the sophistic

³⁷ *Ridentem dicere verum/Quid vetat?* Hor. Sat. I. 1. 24-25.

³⁸ Cf. R. G. Bury's introduction in his edition (Cambridge 1932²), pp. xxxv-vi on Agathon's speech. See also the pun at 185c.

³⁹ *Antidosis* (Or. XV) §§293-94. The theme echoes in Dante, *De Vulgari Eloquentia* I. 2, and was then modified by Petrarch.

⁴⁰ *Διαλεπτολογούμαι*, 1496. This is Strepsiades' brutal perversion of the dialogic principle. Whether Protagoras' books were burned at Athens or not, book burnings were known both to the Greek (NT Act. Apost. 19:19) and Roman worlds (Tac. Ann. XIV. 50), but this attack on learning is more sinister, since it is done in full knowledge and contradiction of the civilized alternative. This is what seems to have shocked Plato so much.

hesitation and lack of commitment to the truths of the city seemed to the Athenians in general to have been harmful and untimely. It is telling that the common man took his revenge by executing for this clouding of the obvious—Socrates. Without the partial advocacy of Plato, would we be so sure that the common man, by his own lights, was wrong? This was already a position defended by Kierkegaard.

The paradox is that Plato, who felt the unfairness of this death so personally, sought to dispel that same hesitation by using some of the Sophists' weapons. Like Thucydides, he borrowed from Protagoras' and Gorgias' armory, for only that supposition explains the resemblance between his art and that of the Melian Dialogue. He was just as interested as Gorgias in the transrational scope of language in the face of the incommunicable, just as interested as Protagoras in the possibilities of myth. Just as much as Pindar or the Christian evangelist, he knew that *ἀπορία* is a positive and religious concept.⁴¹

But, whatever the intended irresolutions of some of his own dialogues, he had little mercy on the new masters of philosophical discourse, of the game of words among the young and influential, for they stood in the way of a "proper" presentation of Socrates, and ultimately by their lack of commitment threatened a second defeat when the city was under attack from outside. In this regard, his dialogue with Aristophanes has led to major misunderstandings of the dialogic principle, since his satire of the Sophists has been interpreted as what it could never be, final truth. At this distance, we must be chary of blaming him for the aura of infallibility his view has acquired. Perhaps he could never have imagined that he would be read in a society where dialogue and its conventions were attenuated or forgotten, drowned by the univocal blare of the radio loudspeaker, the mechanized and deadly laughter of the sitcom.

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

⁴¹ See note 16, above.

