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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Lawrence Wheeler

But the most poised picture is never taken. It is life. It is the two other models, Maureen, auburn-redheaded, and Udo, American son of a West German policeman, sitting on a bluff, in the yellow grass, waiting their turn, able to see out over the entire lake as it darkens like a soup to which a tincture of teriyaki sauce has been added. They appear attuned, as classical figures in a classical landscape. Though actually their talk gives them away as all too contemporary and mortal, as mere scraps of enchanted human confetti.

Udo: Don't worry. Look at Marilyn Monroe. When she finished filming Some Like it Hot, you know what she said? She said, "I looked like a pig."

Maureen (not at all relieved by these kind words): But she was. She was the heaviest she ever was during the filming of Some Like it Hot.

(from the chapter "The Most Poised Picture is Never Taken," in *Scary Kisses*, Brad Gooch)

Every sketch reveals a point of view. R. H. Robins, in his *Short History of Linguistics*, includes in his chapter on Roman language theory an indictment of the grammarian Varro:

A fundamental ignorance of linguistic history is seen in Varro's references to Greek. Similarities in word forms bearing comparable meanings in Latin and Greek were obvious. Some were the

product of historical loans at various periods once the two communities had made indirect and then direct contacts; others were the joint descendants of earlier Indo-european forms whose existence can be inferred and whose shapes can to some extent be 'reconstructed' by the methods of comparative and historical linguistics. But of this, Varro, like the rest of antiquity, had no conception (49).

Yes, certainly—Varro was indeed ignorant of linguistic history. But should we not recognize that in some measure Varro was ignorant precisely because 'linguistic history' had not yet been shaped? Robins here pursues an interesting agenda of near-duplicity, shifting uneasily between two of the variant meanings of 'history,' for much of what Robins impeaches Varro for was not available until wider, comparative methods of analysis came into play, with the European perception of the importance of Sanskrit. That 'discovery' provoked a reorientation of the linguistic world in its own way as profound as the political reorientations consequent upon the conquest of the Americas, but it was not possible until the European world possessed enough of a grasp of a third classical language—the language of the sacred Vedic texts—to recognize the implications for the course of its own linguistic development. The recognition that a third language, with profound similarities in grammar, syntax and vocabulary to both Latin and Greek, had long been preserved in the 'Orient,' sparked the development of both historical and comparative linguistics, and it still drives important streams of linguistic research. But to suggest that Varro ought somehow to have been aware of the implications drawn from the comparative study of Latin, Greek, Sanskrit and the suddenly reconstituted Indo-european language family, without knowledge of that critical third term in the equation, is to hold him responsible for a lack of *intuition*, not of critical judgment or historical

acumen. And this indictment of Varro is the more ironic since Robins' entire text is written under the sign of Thomas Kuhn¹.

How shall we behave toward the past? It seems to me that Robins' approach clearly indicates an attitude we should do better to forget, an attitude that all previous cultures or societies ought to hold knowledge in precisely the same form, structured according to precisely the same forces, that we currently hold; in other words, that previous cultures ought to be our cultural twins or they are not really cultures at all. Clearly the past was different; if we are lucky enough to survive the myriad assaults we have made on the natural being of the world, then culture will come again to be something other soon enough. It is quite simply in the nature of human beings both to construct cultures, and to alter those cultures over time (the additional curious twist of our perverse nature as cultured beings is that we frequently maintain that our altered culture is true to the nature of its origins, that wrenched as it may be it still repeats the intentions of our founding parents). The unique contribution of Claude Lévi-Strauss was to suggest that *all* human cultures recognize in the self an intimate battlefield fraught by conflicting forces: the exigencies of a current moment, aspirations toward an as-yet-unrealized future, and the heavily weighing demands of an historical tradition. Yet as educated persons in this particular *fin-de-siècle* we stand at an enormously dangerous juncture as

¹I mean by this that Robins refers approvingly, and at length, to Kuhn's work on scientific revolutions and their historiography in his introduction. Yet this favorable series of references seems merely, at last, lip service, for Robins violates the implications of Kuhn's systemic understanding of scientific knowledge, arguing (as here, with Varro) for a strange and anachronistic continuity of knowledge between paradigms. Thus a tension arises between Robins' notional understanding of Kuhn's arguments and his performance, within his own historiography, in the carrying out of their implications. A thoroughgoing Kuhnian analysis would suggest that Varro *cannot* know linguistic history, for it has not yet been written; more importantly, a Kuhnian analysis would suggest that Robins imposes his own paradigmatic system in noting Varro's 'ignorance.' Perhaps the more useful recognition is the way in which 'advance' in the sciences—whether the human, natural or social sciences—is so frequently contingent, so narrow and precarious.

regards our own past; our culture seems ever more forcefully to impel us toward seeing the past as only of value as it can be packaged, contained, merchandised—rendered a commodity. This in some measure affects the way in which we teach the apprehension of texts from past cultures: a text is valuable if it contains a grain or kernel of truth, and that kernel must be prised away from the dry husk of the verbiage which surrounds it. Frequently, in considering the problem of form and content, we teach that the preference should be enormously in favor of content, and that, indeed, form can be discarded.

The problem with this line of approach is that it acts uncharitably toward past practice. We are ever more frequently enjoined in the academy to be open to the wealth and diversity of all cultures, to act with charity toward our cultural neighbors. How is it that we fail in this regard looking at the past? Frequently we fit down over the text we examine the rigid frame of our own understanding, leaving aside the question of what new interpretive demands each new text places—and should place—upon us. All too often we fail to appreciate the meaning of an ancient author's choices, even the broadest of those choices, and instead mine his or her text for that nugget of philosophical ore, that gem of positive value.

This is very frequently the case with Plato, who is often approached as if he were a *littérateur manqué*, and not, instead, one of the most supremely gifted masters of our past heritage. We ascribe an irony to Socrates and not to Plato, failing thereby ever to engage his works in a truly *historical* reading, that is, a reading which attempts to account for the context—political, economic, philological, literary, philosophical, what-have-you—in which the work arises. And this begins with even the crudest, first-approximation approach to the text. The Alexandrians taught us that our first obligation was to establish the text—both to ensure its accuracy, and to understand its relation to the tradition from

which it derives. It is this latter obligation on which our modern understanding so often defaults, by failing to set Plato within his own tradition. To read Plato as a bed of philosophical ore is to treat his own construction of the dialogues as trivial. By contrast a somewhat more generous reading undertakes the recognition of several major choices made by Plato in the philosophical writings, not least among them that Plato did not choose to engage the abstract expository essay, in which a unified point-of-view is clearly related to a single, non-contradictory response to a question, although he had available models for so doing. One can respond two ways to this basic problem: either we argue that Plato erred in not choosing the form of the expository essay or that he intended something else (the problem being, of course, that if Plato made such an obvious mistake in writing the dialogues—that is, the mistake of judgment of not simply composing a unified treatise with a dominant point-of-view—then why read him? If he could make such an egregious error, is he likely to be trustworthy on the more important questions?). The more reasonable (and also more charitable) response, I think, is to try to examine what Plato might mean by writing, not expository essays, but plays, and immediately one strikes upon the single unavoidable aspect of dramatic presentation: it suggests that truth operates from and within multiple perspectives. It suggests that Plato may not absolutely subscribe to everything Socrates says or does, or that Socrates is not simply Charlie McCarthy to Plato's Edgar Bergen (or *vice versa*). But you will note that this is not a reading which argues that there is a kernel of philosophical meaning hidden somewhere in the dialogue, which it is our job to mine out of the thing; instead it is the argument that one must be carefully aware, and precisely observant, of everything going on in the Platonic dialogues, for no detail is insignificant, and "truth" is instead a thing to be worked out slowly and patiently by understanding the relation of statement, speaker, tradition and context.

To teach Plato from this perspective is also, therefore, to teach the utter necessity of close careful observation, for it is the constant remarking upon detail, and verification of this detail against a sense of significance, which opens up meaning in reading. We read Plato as the interplay of a grammar of forms found in nearly all the dialogues—narrative frame, speech, debate, mythopoiesis, cultural allusion—and suggest that the successful reading makes clear the way these forms work together, stand apart from and are interwrought with each other. These are simple aspects of the dialogues, yet they are startlingly frequently neglected. In the *Phaedrus*, for example, the narrative setting is crucial to the meaning of the dialogue, yet often left entirely out of consideration. It is of signal importance that Socrates and Phaedrus move *out* of the city, that they cross a river to a grove frequently associated with the trysts of lovers. In that the remainder of the dialogue is taken up with the myriad ways in which eros and polis are deeply interwoven, is it entirely coincidental that Socrates and Phaedrus are made to lie together in a lover's grove, talking of love and its various meanings? As Charles L. Griswold, Jr., has pointed out in his *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, there is a simultaneous play of proxemics and modes of self-identification throughout the dialogue: Socrates and Phaedrus first approach, then withdraw from, each other, over and over again during the piece. The dialogue is also full of identity-play; consider the number of times Socrates feigns an identity—indeed, how many times during the work can we say that Socrates speaks in *suâ propriâ personâ*? At the same time there is a profound wealth of kinds and types of formally distinct speech employed, and a remarkably broad conspectus of argument. The dialogue is thus a thesaurus of the logographer's art, at the same time that it contains a highly critical evaluation of several examples of the logographer's art; simultaneously it is a thesaurus of the kinds and types of self-identity and awareness possible, and it makes necessary a critical reflection on the idea of self-awareness and ironic self-

conception. But it is only a sensitivity to formal matters that leaves us with an understanding of the way in which form and content reinforce and resonate with each other, the way in which the layers of meaning in the *Phaedrus* are multiply enfolded within each other.

Plato roots his meaning in this unfirm ground: language both *is* and *refers*; language gestures toward the concrete world yet crafts its own sensuous reality. Careful students of the dialogue will recall the number of times Socrates derides the narcotic force of myth, the way in which one of the ancient stories sweeps the mind away from all hope of rational reflection; yet this same Socrates, a little later, tells one of the most beautifully enrapturing myths of all time, the story of the charioteer and his struggle to control the yoked horses of the soul. Indeed, that myth (as a narrative construct) is so successful that it is frequently one of the two or three cardinal points ever recalled from the dialogue; but should we not look somewhat more carefully, turn a somewhat more thoughtful glance, on a dialogue which both warns of the mind's simple delight in compelling narrative shape, and then taunts us with precisely that delight? The more complete explication of the dialogue is that which allows us to see the function both of individual constituents and their relation to the whole; we do not read simply to erase the delight in narrativity, but to recognize and recollect it and thereby to understand the myriad ways in which it may function, even down to the narcotic delight in the *new* myth of that *new* epic hero, Socrates. (We might then stop to consider the number of times in the dialogues one encounters the figure of the unrelentingly imitative disciple—disciples both of Socrates and of other masters—who has so completely ingested the master's thought as to attempt to *become* the master. Only a disturbingly literal mind, it seems to me, could miss the ironic swerve of the repeated figure of the overly credulous student.) The useful explication is one which makes comprehensible both the most finely figured detail of the dialogue in and of itself, its function

within the dynamic schemes of the dialogue, and finally its structural integrity within the wider sweep of Plato's works.

In this year's volume of essays produced in the Honors Program at Portland State a large number of writers (Patrick Hamilton, Aaron Johnson, David Johnson, Keri McMurry and Roger Zemke) engage the *Protagoras*, as formally complex and challenging a dialogue as the *Phaedrus*. Their efforts are individually valuable, and gain in value when read together—an interestingly complex view of the work emerges. As a group they strike upon a number of important insights as to the meaning and function of the narrative frame; they are also interestingly diverse in their estimates of Socrates' effectiveness within the dialogue. Others of their colleagues (Debra Blankenship, Elizabeth Upham and Jeffrey Tinnin) consider instead a dialogue which frequently receives little critical attention for its experimentation in form, the *Cratylus*. Finally, Daniel Zajdel has undertaken an explication of the *Gorgias*.

The third writing assignment for the freshman humanities sequence is an assignment emphasizing intertextuality rather than explication: how does a writer employ the tradition which has engendered him or her? What are the ways in which a writer can both acknowledge and differ from the tradition he or she identifies? In short, how does a writer establish him or herself as an historical being, aware of the current moment, the necessary mode, and the subtle ways in which that mode and moment may reflect and relate to previous conditions and necessities? Jennifer Blakeslee, Debra Blankenship, Jennifer Ingram, Osa Skyberg and Phillip Wilson here explore Euripides' *Medea*, certainly one of the ancient world's great focuses of the questioning of traditional values and beliefs, from its topsy-turvy opening in which a household slave speaks from the epic perspective, to the reverse invocation of the Muses, which stops and regenerates the play's action. Finally, Thomas Kerns points out Virgil's reliance upon antecedents in forging the *Aeneid*.

One of the great pleasures of teaching in this program is the opportunity to work with talented and enthusiastic students from richly diverse backgrounds, and that diversity of background provides both a challenge and a reward. In the academy we frequently ask our students to specialize too soon; it may be that, having surrendered a core curriculum, we have also given up all hope of common discourse upon the problems of self-understanding, community and tradition. But the Honors Program does offer a core curriculum, and I am year after year pleased to note that it is not only our students in the traditionally writing-oriented fields who respond to the risk and opportunity of the freshman-year writing project. This year's volume offers work by accounting majors and chemists, marketing students and sociologists, pre-law students and even an English major or two. All write well, with clarity of purpose and ease of expression.

This year I am particularly delighted at the opportunity to work with, in producing this volume, Ms. Melody Leming-Wilson, whose research paper on the history and theory of patriarchy is included. Ms. Leming-Wilson graduates this year with a degree in English Literature from the Honors Program, and I am not alone among the faculty in saying that we shall be sorry to see her go. She has been a strong and determined participant in this program since her first day at Portland State; I am happy to say that I have been lucky enough to enjoy her work in a number of classes, both lecture and seminar. Her writing is always lucid and professional; her dedication to the production of this year's *Anthos* has demonstrated the highest qualities of seriousness of purpose and scholarly craft. I have never before worked with a student in whose capacities I could so completely put my faith, and my acknowledgment of my debt here is only a trifling expression of the gratitude I owe her.