Protagoras: Recollection of Return

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6-1992

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Although Plato's Dialogues are most often read for their philosophical content, it is also important to examine them for the literary forms and techniques which reveal the author's own agendas, thus uncovering deeper levels of meaning in the works. This explication will focus upon allusion to the cultural corpus, narrative frame, unified integral discourse, participatory debate, and the use of mythopoeisis. Noted throughout are implicit and explicit ironies, images of the circular nature of the *agon* (contest), the typically Homeric structure of mirroring and issues of recollection and return. All of these forms and techniques contribute to Plato's fictional recasting of the historical figure of Socrates as a new type of Hero in the epic mold: the philosopher-king.

Greek culture in the fourth and fifth centuries was inculcated through the study of Homer and the poets, which is reflected in the literary production of the period. The structure of *The Protagoras* is distinctly Homeric: events or speeches are mirrored from the outside, into a central discussion by the major figures at the debate, much like the mirroring councils of the gods in *The Iliad*. In *The Iliad* Homer begins with an invocation of the Muses, which we find in Plato to be an invocation of Socrates from a friend to tell the story of the conflict with
Protagoras. At the center of *The Iliad* Homer has placed a crucial council of the gods which determines the outcome of the battle, while in *The Protagoras*, Plato places centrally the discussion of the audience concerning the proper form that the debate should follow (the alternating orations that Protagoras would employ versus the dialectic methods of Socrates), which likewise determines the outcome of the battle of words. Also, in the first conversation before dawn between Socrates and Hippocrates, we have a prefiguring of the main debate, much like the prefiguring of the action in *The Iliad* by councils of the gods. At the debate proper, Plato structures the speeches in a mirrored pattern: orations and outright dialectic counter each other in a pattern that balances on either side of the central discussion of the debate itself.

Plato uses Homeric allusion and reference throughout the tale. We have encountered Socrates, like Odysseus, in a return from battle. Hippocrates has just returned from a trip to Oenoe when he learns of Protagoras' visit and comes to fetch Socrates. The return of Odysseus is also suggested when Socrates waits at the threshold for recognition. Throughout the story, lines from Homer are cited. Notably, the first two concern Odysseus' descent to Hades, which suggest the image of visiting the shades of the dead, perhaps reflecting Plato's judgement of the viability of the ideas encountered at Callias' home. Socrates first refers to Hippias of Elis (the teacher of natural science), by quoting from *The Odyssey* a line which refers to recognition and an affinity between Odysseus and Heracles, men who are "ever about to shoot" and subdued by men "inferior by far, who put difficult tasks" on them, suggesting his own affinity to Hippias and prefiguring Hippias' speech during the central discussion. Socrates refers to his own teacher, Prodicus of Ceos, as Tantalus, "who had difficult pains" because he could never reach the food in front of him, suggesting that Prodicus' method of hairsplitting definitions of words keeps him from reaching the goals he strives for. Later,
when Socrates enlists Prodicus' aid in the battle of words, he cites the scene from *The Iliad* where Achilles is threatening the river gods, who must join forces to withstand him. Also like Achilles, Socrates threatens to leave the battle when he cannot have his terms. Again, when Protagoras is reluctant to continue the contest, Socrates quotes from *The Iliad*, extolling the virtue of joining forces in an attempt to answer "baffling" questions. By arguing through the forms of both rhetoric and dialectic, Socrates demonstrates his excellence (*aristeia*), which one might forget, seeing him in "this old coat." This phrase, used at the midpoint of the story, evokes an image of Odysseus and the beggar Iros at the threshold.

Through his use of disjunct exterior and interior narrative frames, Plato brings us to a sensation of being present as Socrates tells his story. Plato begins narrating in a dramatic mode and present tense, in an objective view of the scene as a friend encounters Socrates, who has "just left" the *agon* with Protagoras. When the friend eagerly seeks the story of the debate between these two, Plato shifts to the first person and past tense of Socrates, thus lending an air of immediacy to his recreation of the conversation. Plato also moves in time, from the "present" moment to the earliest hours of the same day, and in space, from the street where we listen to Socrates, to the dark interior of Socrates' home. He continues to shift scene: to Socrates' courtyard until daybreak, thence through the streets to the threshold of Callias' mansion, into one portico and then another adjoining portico, where the action occurs until Socrates takes his leave at the end of his debate with Protagoras. The spatial and temporal shifting of scene further heightens the sensation of immediate presence at the debate, although we are reminded in several sardonic asides from Socrates that we are elsewhere, recalling the scene. Irony is implicit, in that, as Socrates recalls the debate for us, he shifts to first person present tense in delivering the orations of Protagoras and in most of the dialectics between himself
and others. This shift in tense gives us the impression of hearing the words of the others directly, when, in fact, we are reading Plato's own invention of Socrates' "recollection" of the speeches made. Plato never returns us to the dramatic present tense where he had begun, although we have moved with Socrates in a circle through time to the moment before we first met him and his friend in the streets of Athens.

Plato creates for us recurring images of the circle, thus implicitly demonstrating the form the *agon* is following, moving inward to the central discussion among the philosophers and listeners present, then outward to the conclusion, where Socrates announces that the positions taken by the antagonists at the outset have been reversed. When Socrates arrives at Callias' home, he notes with amusement a "beautiful" sight: each time Protagoras reverses direction as he walks to-and-fro in the portico, the two lines of men following him go out and around in a pair of circles, so as to return to their respective positions behind him. Hippias of Elis is seated in the opposite portico, with his listeners gathered around him. Upon Socrates' arrival, the benches are placed in a circle for the *agon*. At the center of the story, Callias and Socrates form a circular figure as Callias restrains Socrates from leaving by grasping him by the right hand and coat.

Since Socrates is our ostensible narrator, the questions of his memory and veracity create further ironies as we read *The Protagoras*. Socrates has indicated to his friend that he has plenty of time to sit down and recall the entire day's events, although he claims at the middle of the contest, and again at the end, that an urgent appointment awaits him, that he must leave. He knew of the presence of Protagoras at Callias' elegant home, yet, he did not hurry to meet and speak with him until impelled to do so by Hippocrates. Even then, when Hippocrates was most ardent to seek out the great man, Socrates counseled waiting for the sunrise, and further dallied at the threshold upon their arrival at the mansion. Socrates
had earlier told his friend of forgetting the presence of Alcibiades "altogether" while engaged in the debate. If we were to listen only to his protestations of forgetfulness, perhaps only a ploy when made to the assembly, certainly coy when referring to Critias' speech in support of impartiality toward the contestants, we might doubt the tale we are told. But, we have both Alcibiades' guarantee that Socrates will "not... be the one to forget" and Socrates' demonstration of near total-recall of lengthy speeches to reassure us of his accuracy in recollection.

Plato makes use of mythopoeisis, another common usage of the society, by having Protagoras recast the creation of man through the story of Epimetheus and Prometheus, wherein Protagoras argues that Zeus gave the gifts of a sense of justice and respect for one's fellows to all men, not just a few. Plato mirrors this myth in Socrates' last speech which ends the debate, while making reference to Epimetheus "overlooking" man and to Socrates "spending time." A poem of Simonides is used to further the subtext on aristocracy versus meritocracy, as well as the frame of memory and time. Protagoras asks if Socrates knows (remembers) the piece, and Socrates replies that he does, quite well. Protagoras then claims Simonides "forgets" what he has said previously "a little further on" in the poem. Socrates turns to Prodicus, with the aforementioned Homeric reference, in "a move to gain time," before launching his own rhetorical aristeia upon the poem. In his final salutation to Socrates, Protagoras says it is "time to turn to other things."

Plato gives us examples of both oratorical and dialectical forms in the agon. Protagoras gives a "long and magnificent display of eloquence," followed by a dialogue with Socrates as interlocutor which leads to a short, "bristling" speech by Protagoras, applauded by the audience. But here Socrates initiates the central discussion of the proper form of debate with his ploy of forgetfulness, arguing for the shorter form of
answers to his questions. After this internal debate among the audience, Protagoras assumes the role of questioner briefly, eliciting Socrates' lengthy display of rhetoric concerning the poem of Simonides, and finally, poetry itself. Following the intervention of the audience to overcome a sulk on Protagoras' part, we return to the familiar Socratic question and answer, until Socrates announces the reversal of positions.

Plato characterizes the debate as being more than just the contest between two men, involving several of the principle followers of each, as well as the two other philosophers present, at several critical junctures. We get the sense of a larger debate, involving the society as a whole, from the references made to Athenians of one party or the other, the presence of various foreigners, discussion of Sparta as a center of Sophistry, and the very subjects discussed. We hear echoed, in the subtexts of the various speeches, this general debate in Athens concerning the rights of the old aristocracy versus those of the emerging power blocs among the lower social groups: the merchants, the non-aristocratic soldiery, freemen, and sailors. During the central discussion of the form the debate should take, Hippias says, "... I count you all my kinsmen and family and fellow citizens — by nature, not by convention. By nature like is kin to like, but custom, the tyrant of mankind, does much violence to nature." From the perspective of history, we recognize ironies throughout, as when Alcibiades is characterized by Critias as "... always out to win when he takes up a cause." But we know that Alcibiades precipitated the disastrous losses to Athenian power incurred by the Sicilian Expedition, and Critias himself is to be exiled following the fall of the oligarchy he led and reviled as a traitor to Athens for going over to the side of Sparta during the Peloponnesian War. Plato, through Socrates, argues for a return to the old order of things, where virtue was conveyed to "... those ... whom the gods love ...," e.g., the aristocracy. Thus, for Socrates to end by having demonstrated
virtue to be knowledge, and therefore eminently teachable, is
doubly ironic when we think of Plato's failure to teach his own
philosophy to the rulers in Sicily many years later.

Plato thus recapitulates Homeric epic form and concerns in
this dialogue. His Socrates argues for a return to aristocratic
rule in Athens, a return to a time of the best men. The themes
of the return, time, and forgetfulness are all to be found in the
Homeric root of Athens' culture. Sometimes appearing as
Achilles in *The Protagoras*, but most often seen as Odysseus,
Socrates seems more the result of mythopoeesis than memory.
Plato is an erudite and accomplished wordsmith, toiling to
forge, through his use of both rhetoric and dialectic, a double-
edged sword with which to slay the enemies of the best and
the beautiful. The return to the divine right of the
philosopher-king, beset by the many men "inferior by far," is
Plato's only true hope for a return to the lost power and glory
of Athens.
Works Cited

