

ON THE FIRST EIGHT LINES OF PLATO'S
*GORGIAS**

It is perhaps obvious that the opposition between philosophy and its deadly rival rhetoric, and the ruthless contention by which this opposition is dramatized, are defining features of Plato's *Gorgias*. It is less obvious that they are prefigured, subtly but unmistakably, in its first eight lines.

CALLICLES: This is how they say you're supposed to approach a war or a battle, Socrates.

SOCRATES: What? Are we late for a feast, as the saying goes?

CAL: You certainly are, and a most elegant feast it was. Gorgias has just finished displaying all kinds of beautiful things for us.

SOC: But this is all Chaerephon's fault, Callicles; he made us linger in the market-place.
(447A1–8)

Tradition tells us that the opening words of the *Republic* and their ordering cost Plato very much time and deliberative effort, partly because of his very determination that they should appear natural, rather than the product of long reflection.¹ It has also been claimed, plausibly, that the very first word (*κατέβην*—'I went down') is intended to resonate throughout the work, and looks forward to the philosopher's duty, after apprehending the Forms, to return to help his benighted fellows in the cave below.² It seems to me at least as plausible to say that the first words of the *Gorgias*—*πολέμου καὶ μάχης*—'a war and a battle'—have the same kind of significance; especially when we remark that they are spoken by Callicles.³ The high degree of flexibility in Greek word order permits the placing of these words first, but nothing in the sense of Callicles' statement itself requires it. And why does Plato give these words to Callicles in particular? Nothing in the overall design of the dialogue requires this, either: after a few words in the opening exchange, he is barely heard from again until the interjection that heralds his climactic confrontation with Socrates. Nothing in the overall design requires it, that is, unless these opening words, in his mouth, are themselves harbingers of the martial character of that very confrontation. The words may also signal something martial in Callicles' personality: his later denigration of the reasoned debate that constitutes philosophical conversation indicates, whether he realizes it or not, that in argument as in life generally, he is committed to that doctrine of 'might makes right' that Nietzsche found so refreshing.⁴

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¹ See Dion. Hal. *Comp.* 25.209; Quint. *Inst.* 8.6.64; Diog. Laert. 3.37; cf. J. D. Denniston, *Greek Prose Style* (Oxford, 1952), 41. What Denniston says of Herodotus applies equally to Plato: 'The effect may seem due to accident. But such accidents do not befall inferior writers.'

² See M. F. Burnyeat, 'First words: a valedictory lecture', *PCPS*, 43 (1997), 4–8.

³ See P. Friedländer, *Plato* (New York, 1964), 2.245, and cf. Burnyeat (n. 2), 11–12. My procedure in this paper is merely an extension of Burnyeat's, which was in turn inspired by a passage in Proclus' commentary on the *Parmenides*.

⁴ On Nietzsche's admiration for Callicles, see E. R. Dodds' Appendix to his edition of the *Gorgias* (Oxford, 1959), 387–91.

If we now turn to the thought in which these opening words are embedded, we see more portents of what is to come. Consider Callicles' opening remark, 'This is how they say you're supposed to approach a war or a battle, Socrates', and Socrates' reply, 'What? Are we late for a feast, as the saying goes?' (A1–4) This is only intelligible if we suppose, with commentators from Olympiodorus and the scholiasts to Dodds and Hamilton, an allusion to a proverb along the lines of 'First at a feast, last at a fight.'⁵ Much content is compressed into this opening exchange. Callicles, perhaps with only the latter half of the proverb in mind, is merely taking a roundabout and picturesque means of saying 'You're late.'⁶ Socrates over-interprets this, as it were, to mean that Callicles is accusing him of traducing the entire proverb, by being late where it specifically recommends promptness. Yet Callicles is equal to Socrates' wit, identifying (as may have been Socrates' ironic intention) the 'feast' in question with the very rhetorical display of Gorgias' that Socrates has just missed: 'You certainly are, and a most elegant (*ἀστυεῖας*) feast it was. Gorgias has just finished displaying all kinds of beautiful things for us' (A5–6). Notice that, if Socrates *has* traduced the entire proverb, then he is not only late for a feast, but *early for a fight*. And this he certainly is: his deadly philosophical combat with Callicles does not begin for another thirty-four Stephanus pages. (Callicles' role in this opening exchange also ensures that his later confrontation with Socrates, prefaced by his sudden question of Chaerephon at 481B, does not come entirely out of the blue, but has more the character of a 'main event' for which the conversations with Gorgias and Polus turn out to have served as preparation. This sense of progression toward a climax is reinforced by the successive stripping away of 'masks of propriety' as each interlocutor gives way to the next. Callicles will accuse Polus of exactly the failing of which Polus accuses Gorgias: succumbing through a 'false sense of shame' to the temptation to pay lip-service to conventional morality in their answers to Socrates' questions. This implies a reason why the dialogue is not called *Callicles*, as we might otherwise expect: the complacent, would-be respectable admiration of rhetoric exemplified by Gorgias is much commoner than the more profound, aggressive and shocking attitude of Callicles, but the more difficult refutation of the latter is necessary to see what's really wrong with the former.⁷)

This first exchange, then, breezy as it seems, is freighted with meaning and wit, and is perhaps itself as 'elegant' as any rhetorical showpiece—with the vital difference that it has exactly the form later championed by Socrates over rhetoric: short question and answer. A still further layer of meaning is uncovered, however, if we turn our attention from these opening six lines to the situation that has prompted them. It is a commonplace that artistry may consist as much in what is left out of a work as in what is put in, and there is surely nothing arbitrary in Plato's decision to have the *Gorgias* begin *after* the end of Gorgias' rhetorical display—as if to intimate: what

⁵ See Olympiodorus, *In Platonis Gorgiam Commentaria*, 1.3, translated by R. Jackson, K. Lycos and H. Tarrant as Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato's Gorgias* (Leiden, 1998); see 65. Cf. Dodds (n. 4) ad loc. and W. Hamilton's translation of the dialogue (Harmondsworth, 1960), 19, n. 1.

⁶ Alternatively Socrates and Callicles may be alluding to separate proverbs; this would make Socrates' reply less neat. A traditional association of cowardice with gluttony as diverse manifestations of weakness of will, epitomized in the characters of Falstaff and Bunter, speaks for a single proverb; cf. *I Henry IV*, 4.3: 'The latter end of a fray and the beginning of a feast Fits a dull fighter and a keen guest' (quoted by Dodds [n. 4] ad loc.). Either way, Callicles' allusion to a proverb which endorses cowardice may also look forward to the morally unsavoury features of his outlook.

⁷ I here follow a suggestion of an anonymous referee.

interest could such an event hold for real philosophers who (as the subsequent dialogue confirms) will naturally reject rhetoric for dialectic? This disdain for rhetorical virtuosity implicit in Plato's timing of the start of the action is mirrored in the world of the dialogue by an equivalent disdain on the part of Socrates himself, who could not be bothered even to show up for the performance, although the Athenian intelligentsia would certainly be out in force for a public appearance in the city by the world-famous Sicilian rhetorician.⁸

If part of Plato's design, in this opening exchange and the circumstances that occasion it, is the implicit denigration of rhetoric, we should not be surprised to find him also signalling allegiance to the Socratic method of dialectic which he opposes to it throughout the subsequent dialogue. This is just what we find in Socrates' next remark:

SOCRATES: But this is all Chaerephon's fault, Callicles; he made us linger in the market-place (*ἐν ἀγορᾷ ἀναγκάσας ἡμᾶς διατρήσαι*). (A7–8)

Chaerephon made Socrates linger in the market-place. The wholesale allusion to Plato's *Apology* is so glaring, once discerned, that it is hard to believe it has not been remarked upon before (as, to my knowledge, it has not). The market-place (*ἀγορά*) was Socrates' setting of choice for his interrogations of 'anyone, citizen or foreigner' (*Ap.* 23B5–6) on the subject of virtue, the best state of the soul and the best kind of life (*ibid.* 17C8). Socrates devoted most of his adult life to these interrogations (23B4–C1), and he tries to explain this devotion to the jury at his trial by recounting his first such encounters, with a politician and various poets and craftsmen (20E8–23C1). These encounters were prompted by Socrates' desire to refute the superficial meaning, as a prolegomenon to uncovering the hidden meaning, of the oracle at Delphi, who had replied in the negative to the question 'Is any man wiser than Socrates?' (21A4–7) It was not Socrates himself, of course, who had put this question to the oracle, but his friend Chaerephon (20E8–21A6).

Notoriously, it is hard to understand how Socrates can have intended his jury to find in his story about the oracle a rationale for his entire subsequent way of life, in the form of a perceived divine command, implicit in the oracle's response, that he spend his life in philosophical questioning.⁹ But it is impossible to deny that he did intend the story to bear this explanatory burden (20C4–E8). So the original incident, according to Socrates at his trial, which led inexorably to his spending his life interrogating people about virtue and related subjects, more often than not in the market-place, was the question put to the Delphic oracle by the impetuous Chaerephon. Socrates' words to Callicles evoke just this life-changing event. Chaerephon made¹⁰ Socrates linger in the market-place: not only just now, but for the whole of his philosophical life. That life in the market-place was devoted to the dialectical questioning Socrates champions in the *Gorgias* against the worthless pretensions of rhetoric. Socrates' detention in the market-place while Gorgias waxed lyrical before the crowd stands at the head of the dialogue like an emblem of the

⁸ The sensational embassy to Athens of the historical Gorgias in 427 B.C. revolutionized the practice of rhetoric. See D. Nails, *The People of Plato* (Indianapolis, 2002), 157.

⁹ See C. D. C. Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology* (Indianapolis, 1989); cf. T. Brickhouse and N. Smith, *Socrates on Trial* (Oxford, 1989), and J. Doyle, 'Socrates and the oracle', *Ancient Philosophy* 24 (2004), 19–36.

¹⁰ *ἀναγκάσας* —echo of *Ap.* 23E4–5: 'I thought it necessary (*ἀναγκαῖον*) to take the god's command with the utmost seriousness' (I am indebted for this observation to T. Johansen).

supremacy over rhetoric Socrates is destined to win on dialectic's behalf in his conversations with Gorgias, Polus and, above all, Callicles himself.

University of Bristol

JAMES DOYLE
j.a.doyle@bristol.ac.uk
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ARTAPANUS AND THE FLOODING OF THE NILE*

In Artapanus' peculiar version of the encounter between Moses and the Egyptian pharaoh, we are told that Moses struck the Nile with his rod, τὸν δὲ ποταμὸν πολύχουν γενόμενον κατακλύζειν ὄλην τὴν Αἴγυπτον. ἀπὸ τότε δὲ καὶ τὴν κατάβασιν αὐτοῦ γίνεσθαι. (Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 9.435b). As far as I can tell, nearly all translators of Artapanus (Eusebius) translate the latter sentence in the same way: 'from that time on the flooding of the Nile took place'. In other words, the annual inundation of the Nile started with Moses' miraculous act. 'Inundation' is the word used by Gifford and Collins, 'flooding' by Holladay and Wills; 'Ausuferung' by Walter (134). Viger rendered in Latin, *in agros sese Nilum effudisse*.¹ This seems perfectly reasonable. Artapanus is fond of aetiologies. The only problem, one to my knowledge not acknowledged by anyone who has written on, edited or translated Artapanus, is that there is absolutely no evidence that *κατάβασις* can mean 'inundation' nor is it even easy to see how the noun could come to have such a meaning. And if that is what Artapanus meant, he could readily have written τὸν κατακλυσμὸν.² In addition, one misses some adjective or phrase that would mean 'regular' or 'annual'.³

κατάβασιν is, I think, a scribal error. We should read *κατάρραξιν*. Thus, the statement is 'from that time on there took place the cataracting of the Nile'. That is, the famous cataracts of the Nile came about because of Moses' smiting of the river and its initial flooding. Needless to say, this is not the science of hydrography. Palaeographically, the change is easy. The corruption was also aided by the movement from the very unusual word to the commonplace one. Indeed, I have not found *κατάρραξις* in any dictionary. But it does occur in a rhetorical treatise found in

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¹ E. H. Gifford's edition of Eusebius' *Praep. evang.*, vol. 3.1 (Oxford, 1903), 465; J. J. Collins in J. H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York, 1985), 2.902; C. R. Holladay, *Fragments From Hellenistic Jewish Authors* (Chico, 1983), 1.221; L. M. Wills, *Ancient Jewish Novels* (Oxford, 2002), 171; F. Viger's translation, found in T. Gaisford's edition of the *Praep. evang.* (Oxford, 1843), 401; N. Walter, *Fragmente jüdisch-hellenistischer Historiker* (Gütersloh, 1976), 134.

² The only exception to 'inundation, flooding' appears to be E. des Places in his edition and translation of *Praep. evang.* Book 9 (Paris, 1991), 279: 'ensuite vint la décrue'. Unlike the standard view, this appears to have little sense or point. Do we need to be told that after the flooding the waters diminished? Further, one would expect ἀπὸ τότε here to mean more than 'ensuite'. Finally, like the standard view, des Places wants *κατάβασις* to have a meaning that it apparently never has.

³ Some translators add it, e.g. Walter (n. 1), 134, 'seine jährliche Ausuferung'.

⁴ *Rhetores Graeci* (Stuttgart, 1834). It appears to mean 'clash', though it might mean 'dismounting'.

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