

HARRY BERGER, JR.

THE PERILS OF *Uglytown*



STUDIES IN STRUCTURAL MISANTHROPOLOGY
FROM PLATO TO REMBRANDT

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Studies in Structural Misanthropy from Plato to Rembrandt



Harry Berger, Jr.

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First edition

to Judith Anderson
and Jill Frank

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Preface

The Perils of Uglytown develops a cultural concept that gets explored first in a series of chapters on Plato's dialogues and then in studies of early modern authors and artists ranging from L. B. Alberti to Shakespeare and Rembrandt. The concept, which I call *structural misanthropology*, is a variation on Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion of structural anthropology. In Part I, "Misanthropology in Plato's Dialogues," I argue that the society Thucydides and Plato represent is an *apprehensive* society: a society founded on the misanthropic perception of the social order as a system of relationships motivated primarily by *apprehension*—that is, by the prehensive desire to take and the apprehensive fear of being taken. I use this term advisedly because *prehension* is the act of grasping, seizing by the hand, and I connect it to the handwork involved in the culture of inscription based on handwriting (*cheiro-graphē*).

Part I centers on the ways in which Plato develops the concept in his depictions of the dialogue between Socrates and his interlocutors. It shows in detail how Socrates both articulates and deconstructs their wish that the Athenian city-state (the *polis*) they imagine could be an ideal city, a *Kallipolis*. The particular dialogues explored in this section are *Lysis*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*, *The Republic*, and *Timaeus*. At the heart of Plato's account of structural misanthropology is a critique of *pleonexia*, which means not only "having more" (a literal translation) but wanting to have more, wanting to be bigger, better, superior. If you suffer from *pleonexia*, you never have enough because you aspire to total and immortal self-sufficiency even if that involves draining the rest of the world of power, wealth, pleasure, and being.

Part I of *The Perils of Uglytown* also shows how the dialogues dramatize a defensive side to *pleonexia*. They depict a society full of members who are aware of competing with one another, and who would not want to have others do to them what they would like to do to others. *Pleonexia* produces the anxiety that compels them to act according to the Brazen

Rule: take from another before another takes from you. The ethics of *pleonexia* is well expressed by Polemarchus in the *Republic* when he defines justice as helping your friends and hurting your enemies.

Part II, “Misanthropology in Early Modern Culture,” turns to the Renaissance in Italy, the Netherlands, and England. I discuss structural misanthropology first in the work of several Italian humanists (Alberti, Leonardo, Castiglione, and Vasari), then in English drama (*Gorbuduc* and several plays by Shakespeare), and finally in group portraits by Hals and Rembrandt.

I dedicate this book to Judith Anderson and Jill Frank. For more than half a century Professor Anderson and I have exchanged ideas about anything and everything we’ve both worked on. The deep insights into literature and interpretation that shine forth from her many books were first shared with me during the middle decades of the last century. My Plato chapters are largely the result of years of conversation with Professor Frank. Her brilliant responses to questions that arose during writing helped me formulate my arguments more clearly and showered bright insights on dark passages I hadn’t understood.

Since I’m not a classicist, I’ve relied heavily on the knowledge, perceptiveness, and good will of several colleagues and friends in addition to Judith and Jill. The wonderful group of classicists at UC Santa Cruz has been with me all the way, and it gives me the greatest pleasure to thank Karen Bassi, Mary-Kay Gamel, Charles Hedrick, John Lynch, Jenny Lynn, Gary Miles, and Dan Selden. Thanks also to other friends and colleagues in literature who have supported, informed, and encouraged my writing projects over the years: Peter Erickson, Jay Farness, Helene Moglen, Forrest Robinson, Deanna Shemek, Ty Miller, Tom Vogler, and Michael Warren. And once again, as always, thanks and love to Beth.

I. *A Polar Model of Culture Change*

Introduction to Structural Misanthropology

Two Paradoxes: The Paradox of Transcendence, or the Traditional Paradox

The creature becomes the creator of the creation in which it is a creature. This magical or miraculous transformation can occur only if the creature disavows, or remains ignorant of, its act and power of creation and continues to think of itself as the creature, not the creator, of the creation.

For example, we human beings create our gods, our cosmos, our laws of nature, our structures of kinship and gender, and our conceptions of soul or self. Yet if we don't know or believe we made these things up, we confer reality and transcendence on them. Whenever we discover or decide that we made them up, we reduce the gods, the cosmos, and the rest to mere human creations. We demote them to fictions and illusions.

The Paradox of Technology, or the Modern Paradox

The creator becomes the creature of its creation. This unhappy state of affairs occurs even as—or because—we continue to think of ourselves as creators, not creatures, as masters not servants, of our creation.

For example, human beings create technology, machines, economic systems, and political systems. These creations come to shape the environment, the future, the culture, and the behavior of their human creators. They exist over against their creators. They have and develop their own logics of change. They confine, restrict, and occasionally enslave their creators. They defy our attempts to control them and challenge our efforts to keep them instrumental to human ends. They behave as if in fact we did not create them, and so they become realities and transcend human control even though we are aware that we did create them.

From the modern standpoint, the relation between the paradoxes of transcendence and technology can be mapped onto the relation between the cultural conditions that have been called “enchantment” and “disenchantment.” I suppose we would then have to introduce a “post-modern” standpoint that would enable us to appreciate the ways in which the modern paradox generates its own kinds of enchantment.

The etymologies of *traditional* and *modern*: *traditional* is from Latin *tradere*, “to hand down”; *modern* is from Latin *modo*, “only, just now, lately; soon, directly;” also “but,” an adversative that emphasizes the *over-againstness* of the modern.

The Continuum: From Transcendence to Technology

To construct a model of culture change, place these two paradoxes at the poles of a continuum:

Traditional—————Modern

Treat this continuum as a diachronic system, that is, a system that moves and changes through time from the dominance of traditional ideology toward the dominance of modern ideology. Represent this spatially as a move from left to right:

[illegible]

Next, superimpose this continuum on any particular chronological sequence in history. Sequences might vary in length, from a generation to an era and beyond (the sequence, for example, from medieval to early modern, or from early modern to modern). Then apply the following hypotheses to the sequence.

1. The sequence will tend to move from the traditional toward the modern pole.
2. Traditional and modern ideologies are in direct conflict with respect to their evaluation of human creativity. Although both ideologies—and the worlds they construct—are equally dependent on it, creativity is disclaimed or repressed in the traditional ideology but it is acknowledged, privileged, and developed in the modern ideology. Along the whole spectrum, then, the two polar ideologies will impose their conflicting pressures:

Traditional>><>><>><>><>><>><>><>>Modern

3. Any moment along the continuum will display the effects of a mix of traditional and modern vectors, the former pulling the moment back, the latter urging it forward. Conflict and contradiction can be analyzed in terms of the particular form the opposition between traditional and modern influences takes at that moment.

4. Some sequences will seem more stable, stagnant, or conservative than others. But this can be deceiving: what we look for in such cases are changes toward the modern—episodes of “modernization”—that are secured by being masked in traditionalizing rhetoric, ideology, or appearances. Let this modernizing strategy be called *retraditionalization*.

5. The traditional ideology is based on a disclaimer that doesn’t squelch human creativity but displaces it to nonhuman agencies (gods, nature, spirits). The modern ideology challenges this basis by bringing both the disclaimer and the strategy of displacement out into the open. It accuses traditional ideology of creating “realities” that it pretended only to receive, only to find already there. This modernizing strategy has been called *disenchantment*, also *demystification*.

Basic Definitions: Transcendence and Nature

Transcendence names a genetic category, that is, a category of source or creative agency. It denotes whatever appears to the categorizer to owe its origins to nonhuman sources. In other words, the category of transcendence is established in terms of a contrastive relation to human agency.

Two perspectives on transcendence: Given two positions, let’s call them Observer and Native, transcendence is *unconditional* when Observer agrees that what Native calls transcendent *is* transcendent. For example, Observer and Native may agree that although humans intervene in affecting conditions of birth and death and weather, birth and death and weather are not in themselves human inventions.

Transcendence is *conditional* when Observer doesn’t agree with Native’s ascriptions of transcendence. For example, Native might say that gender, kinship, society, the state, the emperor, patriarchy, marriage, and babies are all marked by transcendence—that is, are produced by god or nature with a little supplementary human help. Observer might not agree with much of this, and might decide that Native is naturalizing or transcendentizing what are actually social or cultural constructions. Observer may then suspect that Native is up to something ideological or political. Don’t forget, though, that those who are observers of another culture are at the same time natives in their own.

ON NATURE: SOME DEFINITIONAL BOUNDARIES

1. Sometimes *nature* signifies organic and inorganic systems of reproduction (“creation”) and their products (“creatures”).

2. Sometimes it signifies whatever was already there for practitioners of art and technology to imitate, improve, destroy, modify, or transform. “Copying from nature” doesn’t have to be restricted to making likenesses of birds, trees, bodies, forests, or mountains. The phrase more generally suggests being in the presence of the original you copy.

Nature in this loose sense can include other products of art or technology or social construction. For example, cities, landscapes, lineages, and genders can play the role of nature if they become subjects of artistic imitation or of technological modification. Here, *nature* signifies the referential raw material that art and technology work with. The source of this raw material is often referred to as Mother Nature. Can you imagine why?

3. Definition (2) suggests why it has become easy to put into play the familiar contemporary idea of nature as a cultural construction, and why *naturalizing* has become an ideological strategy for investing human constructions with the authority of the real.

Transcendence and technology. If the explicit source of technology is human art, invention, and agency, then the products of technology by definition can’t be transcendent, and this is so under the terms of traditional ideology. But the logic of the modern paradox places transcendence and technology in a different relation:

At the outset, the development of all technologies reflects . . . human intelligence, inventiveness, and concern. But beyond a certain point . . . these qualities begin to have less and less influence upon the final outcome [as particular technologies develop, accelerate, and move seemingly under their own steam toward unforeseen consequences]; intelligence, inventiveness, and concern . . . cease to have any real impact on the ways in which technology shapes the world.¹

In the long run, “technique sharply reduces the role of human invention” because it “poses primarily technical problems which consequently can be resolved only by technique. . . . Technical elements combine among themselves, and they do so more and more spontaneously.”² They seem to have a creative agency of their own, an agency that is not—or not fully—under human control.

In this respect we can say that technology is and produces transcendence. Thus, while technology is opposed to transcendence in the tradi-

tional ideology, it may be aligned or identified with transcendence in the modern ideology. For that reason, systems of technology challenge, compete with, and infiltrate systems of religion. If technology always brings on *Die Götterdämmerung* doesn't it generate its own theogonies?

Art and technique. Our word "art" comes from Latin *ars*, which was a general term used to denote any skill, craft, and trade or profession, and also the know-how, the knowledge or theory, required to practice any of these. Latin *ars* is the equivalent of the Greek term *technē*, from which we get *technique* and *technology* (systems of techniques). *Ars* and *technē* appear to mean the same thing. But once we acknowledge the ironic paradox of technology described in the preceding paragraph, it becomes important to distinguish *art* from *technique*:

Let *art* in its most general sense refer to conscious human agency—the sum total of intentions, desires, guided practices, and objectives that account for production or creation of any sort.

Let *technique* and *technology* refer to mechanisms, procedures, instrumentalities, agencies, and systems that are initiated by art but break free of its control and become transcendences in their own right.³

Genealogical Flipover, or The Pancake Maneuver

If A is the cause of B, then B is the cause that A is a cause; the effect is the cause of the cause; the cause is the effect of the effect.

I call this simple, tilting hypothesis the parallogism of inverse causality.⁴ It lies at the root of the most stimulating and influential criticism of the last century. It's the basic move of deconstruction. In *Allegories of Reading*, Paul de Man traces it back to Nietzsche.⁵ The definitive account of it in Shakespeare criticism is to be found in Patricia Parker's brilliant meditations on and explorations of *the preposterous*.⁶

Inverse causality governs a hierarchy of structural flipovers ranging from the scheme of *hysteron proteron* and the trope of *metalepsis* to the larger structures of genealogical (re)construction. What they all have in common is the founding belief or premise that the past is continuously recreated by or in the present. The premise draws its inspiration from a mix of now-canonical sources (Hegel, Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, to name a few). It is a staple of the hermeneutics of suspicion, and it both presupposes and generates a skill of ironic reading. Thus it is that in the materializing precipitations of my preconscious imaginary the convergence of structural

flipovers with ironic skill modulates into operations performed with an iron skillet and becomes *the pancake maneuver* in modern criticism.⁷

A case in point: The traditional and modern poles, and the continuum they enclose, are themselves a modern invention. The hallmark of the modern attitude is its ability to think this continuum and to put it in play. But there is evidence that in the most ancient agrarian cultures the continuum was thought and put into play. This suggests that “modern,” as defined earlier, is an ideology that can be found at any time, and is not restricted to “the modern era.” And wherever it is found, it is set over against the “traditional” ideology.

The Rule of Culture Change: Abstraction and Structural Misanthropology

A basic rule governs the shift from the traditional toward the modern pole of the continuum. Let’s approach it with some examples. Consider speech, writing, print, and the Internet. Speech is entirely performed “by” the body and its instruments or organs.⁸ Writing employs extra-bodily instruments that *extend* the power of communication over greater periods of time (written records) and space (long-distance messages).

Print extends this power further than writing by the mechanical reproduction and the wider dissemination of multiple exact replicas. Video and cybernetic telecommunication intensify and accelerate the process. So we say of speech, writing, print, and the Internet that each (in that order) extends the power of communication further from the body. But we also acknowledge that the move from speech to writing to print to video and cybernetic communication is a move in the direction of greater *abstraction from the body*.

Abstraction is separation: The message “goes through” the inscribing hand to the inscription. There, separated from the writer, it can travel abroad and be read, be interpreted, by readers who are absent to the writer. The writer is not present to monitor or correct readers’ (mis)interpretations of the written text. This makes writing more vulnerable than speech to the danger that the sender of the message will lose control of its meaning. Also, in a manuscript culture, the author of a message is likely to dictate it to scribes, who may miswrite the dictation or hear it incorrectly. If several scribes write the same dictation, no two inscriptions of the message will be exactly alike.

Print is more efficient than writing because it increases the power and scope of communication. But for the author it involves greater loss of

control over both the production and the reception of the message. In writing, the message is separated from the writer but produced by the human hand. In printing, the production is transferred from hand to machine: humans operate the machine, but it is the machine rather than the hand that inscribes the message. The abstraction of the process from the body is thus greater in printing than in writing.

To move from speech to writing to printing to the electronic medium is to broaden the range of communication and extend its power. But at the same time it progressively abstracts the means of production from the control of the body. The production of meaning is abstracted not simply to the forces of the medium but to whoever is in the position to control those forces and to profit from that control.

The same pattern of change prevails in other contexts: in the move from manual labor to machines, and in the move from perception to spectacles, telescopes, amplifiers, and electronic brains. In both of these moves, power and meaning are simultaneously *extended* from the body and *abstracted* from it.

The terms *extension* and *abstraction* denote contrary tendencies. To extend power is obviously to increase it. But the condition of extension is that the power be abstracted, separated, from the limits of the body. And in the necessity of abstraction lies the danger of *alienation*—that is, the danger that although the process of abstraction gives senders and producers increasing power, it diminishes their control over that power. *To alienate* in this sense is to lose or cede control to others of something that was originally yours. Enhancement and alienation are the manifest and latent consequences of the same process. You can't have one without the other.

In all the cases mentioned—communication, labor, observation, audition, computation—power and meaning are alienated from the body to the technical instrument. To free the function and its power from the corporeal limits of productive agency is to alienate it to the forms, the forces, and the logic of instrument or medium. Here, then, is *the abstraction rule*, the basic rule that governs the shift from the traditional toward the modern pole of the continuum described above: *the increase of human power produced by abstraction from the body is directly proportional to the decrease of human control over that power.*

This rule governs the distinction between *art* and *technique* discussed previously: there, too, the expanding power of human art has the paradoxical effect of expanding the autonomous power of technique and thereby

diminishing human control over technique. Technique, in other words, is alienated art. It is the specifically modern form of transcendence.

FROM THE ABSTRACTION RULE TO THE PROSTHETIC DIALECTIC

The abstraction rule governs a dynamic that can be broken down into four basic moments:

First, technology enhances life; machines do better what we used to do for ourselves. They encourage fantasies of power, self-transcendence, and idealization.

Second, the price of enhancement is the alienation of control that occurs because machines have their own structure and logic, an alienation leading toward what Julia Kristeva has analyzed as the abjection of the body.⁹

Third, when we become dependent on our machines, when usage converts technological enhancements into necessities, they come to feel less like enhancements and more like compensatory or prosthetic supplements, that is, things we can't seem to do without.

Fourth, in the backwash produced by this dynamic, a tendency arises to disparage traditional cultural constructions of nature, human nature, and the body.

The critical problem arises from the ironic interplay between the first two moments. Because they involve the transfer of command functions from bodily to extrabodily mechanisms, I'll call this transfer *cybernetic alienation*. Think of the anxieties built into the transfer of economic function and power from (a) human hands in situated markets to (b) the invisible (and severed) hand of an abstract market process.¹⁰

I return now to the third moment of the dialectic, in order to explore the impact of the alienation effect on the relation between two resonant terms that often appear together: *technological* and *prosthetic*. Though they signify different forms of activity, they are often treated as interchangeable. This treatment involves both a profound error and a profound truth.

The term "prosthesis" designates compensatory devices in the area of medical technology as opposed to more general technological achievements. We distinguish artificial legs from automobiles, hearing aids from audio systems, and eyeglasses from microscopes and telescopes. It doesn't feel right to apply the label *prosthesis* to the enhancements of power or function produced by the move from speech to writing to printing to word processing, or by the move from manual labor to machines, or by the move from walking to riding and driving, or by the move from physiologically based perception to telescopes, amplifiers, and computers.

Such changes aren't merely compensatory. They're additive. They increase the power of human functions by extending them from the limits of the organic body to the instruments or media of communication, labor, transportation, perception, and representation.

That seems to be a pretty clear and simple distinction. But as I mentioned, the two terms—*prosthetic* and *technological*—are often treated as if interchangeable. It's easy enough to chalk this up to sloppy thinking, or else to enthusiasm and deconstruction. Dozens of cybernuts have pounded the term "prosthesis" to airy thinness. And yet, in spite of my skepticism, those who confuse technology with prosthesis have a point. There happens to be a good reason why it's sometimes hard to uphold the distinction between the additive and the compensatory senses.

To start at the level of trivia, think of the sense of disability often expressed by people temporarily without a computer or a telephone or a car. What was once an enhancement becomes a necessity, lacking which they feel—relatively speaking—"crippled." This is one of the minor unintended consequences of technological advance and cybernetic alienation. But let's shift to a level of less trivial trivia.

Think of the effect intended by the strategies for marketing the so-called natural look that have become standard operating procedure in the culture of cosmetics. They try to give aesthetic enhancements the utilitarian value of necessities without which consumers would be inadequate. They offer compensation for the shortcomings they persuade you that you have and should do something about.¹¹

The health of economic regimes depends on the finesse with which they inject into the cultural imaginary the virus of misanthropic self-understanding, the suspicion or fear that without the alienated enhancements those regimes provide, human life would be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Hobbes attributed this miserable state, the state he calls Warre, to the absence of government, commerce, and technology. But as I see it, what he calls the state of Warre may be one consequence of their functioning presence. *Leviathan* is either a paean to or a parody of structural misanthropology.

Cybernetic alienation may produce not only diminishing control but also awareness of diminution. What is culturally represented as merely natural and bodily tends to be devalued. It's partly the decrease of control over the increase of power that unsettles the distinction between technological enhancement and prosthetic compensation. But there is also another factor that contributes to devaluation.

Consider the common precondition of Albertian perspective, the camera obscura, and the camera: All involve the abstraction and alienation of a monocular system of vision from the binocular organic system. The increase and refinement of visual power are consequent on its being freed, alienated, from the limits of the body. In *On Painting*, Alberti shows himself fully aware that he is proposing a hypothetical method in which seeing is described on the model of picture-making and geometry, an abstractive model that “requires the mathematics, but not the physics or physiology, of vision.”¹² It is nevertheless the case that Alberti arbitrarily assigns the vertex of the geometrical system—the distance point—the value of an eye, the eye of a virtual observer, a cyclopean robot, constructed and controlled by the system. Having been abstracted from the body, Alberti’s virtual system of vision is then reincorporated in an imaginary body, an idealized geometrical phantasm that any empirical viewer may incarnate by standing in the right place.

“Pre-cybernetic machines could be haunted; there was always the specter of the ghost in the machine.”¹³ As Beth Pittenger has suggested, Donna Haraway’s statement can be turned around: pre-cybernetic humans could be haunted by the specter of the machine in the body, an idea-producing machine trapped in the *morbidezza* of the body and its senses.¹⁴ The anxiety about the limits of the senses given expression in the time of Copernicus was already a specter haunting Alberti’s project in the early fifteenth century.

Jean-Louis Comolli notes that “the invention of photography . . . perfected the *camera obscura* and thereby achieved what generations of painters had for centuries demanded from the technique of artificial perspective—the possibility of copying nature faithfully.” At that point “the human eye was abruptly seen as neither altogether unique, nor quite irreplaceable, nor very perfect.”¹⁵ It may be that a specter of this anxiety cast its shadow over the Quattrocento neighborhood of perspective experiment and magic-working. For Comolli’s terms are as applicable to perspective as to photography: “a strengthening of confidence in a perspective and analogous representation of the world” is offset by “a crisis of confidence in the organ of vision.” In this crisis the human eye was “devalorized and deposed from its central place by the eye” of perspective’s cyclopean observer.¹⁶

The conventional wisdom that stronger glasses can weaken the eyes may be no more than a myth, but it points to a particular form of prosthetic backlash. This form occurs when the enhancements of bodily power or appearance produced by art and technology engender a kind of idealism

in which the going cultural representations of bodily and human nature become targets of dissatisfaction, contempt, aversion, or disgust. Technophiles may exalt the benefits of enhancement and technophobes lament the costs of alienation, but within the structure of technical change there is a motivated skew toward representing the body as a diminished thing.

The alienation and dependency that diminish the value of unimproved human nature, life, and the body retroactively transform enhancement into compensation. Confronting the fallen state to which it has reduced humankind, technology is reduced by its own logic to doing the restorative work of prosthesis. What begins as a surplus enriching nature, adding to it, turns into a substitute that “adds only to replace,” that “fills . . . as . . . one fills a void,” that replaces what has been lost.

These phrases are from Derrida’s *Grammatology*. I cite them because the logic of the slippage from enhancement to compensation accords with what Derrida has described as the logic of the supplement.¹⁷ The ambivalent or even contradictory structure of this logic finds its way into an idiom sometimes used in sentences about prosthesis, and centered on a verb that is cognate with the word *supplement*.

Here, for example, is Montaigne: “she was hanged for using illicit devices to supply her defect in sex.”¹⁸ Here is the 1634 English translation of one of Ambroise Paré’s chapter titles: “Of the Meanes and Manner to repaire or supply the Naturall or accidentall defects or wants in mans body.”¹⁹ Here, at the turn of the last century, is S. H. Butcher pausing in his commentary on the *Poetics* to paraphrase Aristotle’s view of the art/nature relation: “the function . . . of the useful arts is in all cases ‘to supply the deficiencies of nature.’”²⁰ Here is Peter Stallybrass, writing in 1992 about transvestism in the English Renaissance theater: “all efforts to fix gender are necessarily prosthetic” in that “they suggest the attempt to supply an imagined deficiency” by the exchange of clothes or other means.²¹

“To supply a deficiency” is an idiomatic way of saying, “to fill a gap,” but the words also mean “to *create* a deficiency.” Suppose someone who wants to tell you that art improves nature puts it this way: “the forms of art supply deficiencies in the forms of life.” The expression perversely delivers two contradictory messages, for it also says “art adds deficiencies to life and thus diminishes nature.” It simultaneously announces the positive objective of technology and acknowledges the negative and unintended consequences, the prosthetic backlash, built into the misanthropological structure of culture change.

Kaja Silverman observes that the relation between the camera and the eye is “prosthetic: the camera promises to make good the deficiencies of the eye.” “Make good” seems intended to deliver the straightforward meaning of “supplement” or “overcome.” Yet the context of the statement reinstates the ambiguous logic of structural misanthropology: Silverman has just endorsed Jonathan Crary’s argument that new optical and scopic technologies work to “diminish belief in . . . [the eye’s] supposed objectivity and authority.”²²

PART I

MISANTHROPOLOGY
IN PLATO'S DIALOGUES

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2. *The Discourse of Pleonexia*

Thucydides and Plato on the Politics of Communication

The Greek word *logos* means “word,” but it also means a lot of other things. In Plato’s dialogues, for example, its range of denotation includes conversation, speech, story, and saying. An epigram or proverb can also be a *logos*. So can particular arguments or processes of arguing. In the most general sense, a person’s *logos* or argument can be equivalent to what we sometimes call a value system, as when it is said that a father hands his *logos* down to his son.

Logos has the range and diffuseness of our term “discourse,” and one of its uses corresponds pretty closely to our current understanding of that term, beautifully articulated by Catherine Belsey in the following passage:

A discourse is a domain of language-use, a particular way of talking (and writing and thinking). A discourse involves certain shared assumptions which appear in the formulations that characterize it. . . . Ideology is inscribed in discourse in the sense that it is literally written or spoken in it; it is not a separate element which exists independently in some free-floating realm of “ideas” and is subsequently embodied in words, but a way of thinking, speaking, experiencing.¹

Belsey argues that under so expressly post-Saussurian a definition even “common sense” is a discourse, which is to say that, far from being “the collective and timeless wisdom” it seems to be, it is “ideologically and discursively constructed, rooted in a specific historical situation and operating in conjunction with a particular social formation.”²

When this rootedness is more narrowly explored in the cultural ensemble of habits, gestures, and skills that organize the body, *discourse* modulates into what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus*. When it is explored in the specific context of linguistic utterance and exchange, it modulates into what Wittgenstein calls *language games*. Although “discourse” is my translation of

choice for *logos*, I use it loosely enough to include aspects of *habitus* and language-games.

What is historically important and specific about the term *logos* is that its cognitive and semantic dimensions are assimilated to, and colored by, its communicative and performative sense. That is, the concept *logos* reflects in its multivalence a situation in which forms of thought, argument, and public communication were carried on primarily through the oral medium, and were conformed to the structure of that medium.

I use the word “logocentric” to denote this situation. *Logocentric* specifies the speech-centered character of a society’s culture and institutions, the primacy of oral and auditory communication, and the effect of this primacy on collective patterns of thought, belief, motivation, interaction, and public practices. But of course, Athenian society during the fifth century B.C.E. was in transition “from an oral culture to one of written communication.”³ Since the writing was manual, it has been called *chirographic*.

This term has come to have a specific set of connotations in the work of media-shift theorists such as Walter Ong, who use it to contrast the structure and effects of handwriting with those of typographic communication. In the logocentric climate of Athenian culture, however, another distinction is more important: that between the spoken and the written versions of speech, or *logos*. To preserve the emphasis on *this* distinction, let’s replace *chirographic* with the term *logographic*. *Logography* designates the reproduction of *logoi* in writing—the inscription of logocentric patterns of thought, value, and communication.

In its broadly literal Greek sense, *logography* means speechwriting. But in Athenian usage, a logographer (*logographikos*) was specifically a writer of prose history. *The Persian Wars* of Herodotus and *The Peloponnesian War* of Thucydides are examples of logography. The mode of Herodotus was more attuned to oral performance, while that of Thucydides was more writerly in setting itself against this attunement.

The Herodotean mode was “composed for public hearing,” and the assumption on which it “works is that the activity of the historian, like that of the dramatic poet, belongs to the sphere of mimesis, i.e. the faithful and graphic representation of human life.”⁴ Gregory Nagy claims that the author of *The Persian Wars* represented himself as a *logios*, “a master of oral traditions in prose” whose rhetoric was “predicated on the traditions of speaking before a public, not of writing for readers.” The *logios* was parallel to the *aoidos*, or singer, “a master of oral traditions in poetry,” in that

both claimed to preserve and enhance (and perhaps create) the fame (*kleos*) of those about whom they wrote or sang.⁵

Nagy and others have shown that Herodotus was himself aware of the persona or *ēthos* his prose constructed. He was disenchanted enough to insist on distinguishing between the more credible information “obtained by direct observation” and the information obtained secondhand from others. Herodotus lets his readers know that he feels obliged to report what others say but not necessarily to believe it.⁶ Nevertheless, the so-called “father of history” has also been called a “father of lies.”

Thucydides’s history takes aim at this logocentric mode. In *The Peloponnesian War*, the very difficulty of his syntax and density of his style seem calculated to discourage oral recitation and auditory comprehension. Furthermore, he explicitly thematizes the differences at the beginning of his history when he contrasts traditional modes of transmission to his own superior method of testing and presenting evidence.

The flaws he picks out in the Herodotean mode are all those we associate with narratives based on the techniques and motives for producing oral history: the limits of memory, the unreliability of eyewitnesses, the prevalence of legend mystified by antiquity, the uncritical passivity of auditors, the temptation to seduce audiences with rhetorical self-display and fanciful tales (1.20–23). But, as Robert Connor points out, even though his text “initially presents itself as a *treatise* . . . meant for private study,” it gradually modulates into “a rival to, and ultimately a victor over, the poets” as it articulates its own epic and tragic theme, the greatness, length, and sufferings of war.⁷

The problems Thucydides is concerned with are those associated with the conjunction of two structures. The first is the particular type of social order, political constitution, and form of authority Max Weber called “charismatic.” The second is the structure of communication that underwrites this charismatic regime, a structure dominated by logocentric forms of discourse.

In the classic Weberian account, charisma is personal magnetism that operates as a source of institutional authority. Its essential features are, first, that it’s recognized as a gift transcending human power, and second, that it’s recognized as the embodiment of transcendent power in a human figure. To diagram this relation, the human figure stands at the center; above is the Power, the source of the figure’s gift and favor; around the figure is the audience that recognizes this power and confers the status of charismatic

embodiment. The stability of this relation depends, first, on the relative strength or weakness of collective belief in the authorizing Power; and second, on the extent to which both the central figure and the audience can repress or ignore the disabling suspicion that charisma lies in the eye of the observer (or simply that charisma lies).

The charismatic orientation of ancient writing has been brilliantly characterized by Nagy, who notes that “for the ancient Greeks . . . Homer was not just the creator of epic par excellence; he was also the culture hero of epic itself.” “Greek institutions,” he continues, “tend to be traditionally retrojected, by the Greeks themselves, each to . . . a culture hero who is credited with the sum total of a given cultural institution.”⁸ This practice of naming a place or institution or era after a person is called *eponymy* (“after-name,” that is, “named after”). It is what happens when a lineage or tribe takes its name from an ancestor and then confers it on the land it inhabits.

Eponymy dramatically illustrates the close interaction between charismatic authority and logocentric culture. The relation of the eponymous hero to the cultural institution is parallel to that between the oral poet and the written versions of his performances. To quote Jesper Svenbro, the written poem “was a transcription of the living voice of the poet or bard speaking in the first person singular.”⁹ Svenbro’s brilliant account of death by writing in *Phrasikleia* shows how the poet’s fore-acknowledged absence leaves a space for his or her *logos* to be charismatically disseminated, revised, and amplified.

Eponymy is symptomatic of a broader tendency in oral culture: Walter Ong writes that “oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings.”¹⁰ Such cultures tend “to cast up accounts of actuality in terms of contests between individuals,” who therefore take on allegorical dimensions.¹¹

Ong goes on to interrogate this practice. He questions “the abandon with which [those cultures] . . . tended to polarize in virtue/vice categories not merely moral matters as such but also a great deal of essentially nonmoral actuality.” For example, they saw “the operation of what we know today to be economic or social or even purely political forces as essentially naked struggles between moral good and evil.”¹²

Exactly the same perception lies behind Erich Auerbach’s earlier critique of the limited realism, the limited historical awareness, of ancient

logography: “it does not see forces, it sees vices and virtues, successes and mistakes.” It doesn’t explore the forces “and motive sources” underlying “historical movements.” Its problems are apprehended in ethical terms as problems concerning “the individual members of society” rather than the social whole.¹³ A world view organized in these ethical and agonistic terms is dominated by the charismatic category of the visible, audible, embodied person. Its social, institutional, and cosmic orders are iconically condensed in that figure of presence; they share in and extend its reality.¹⁴

As Nagy and others make clear, a critical perspective on the logocentric culture of antiquity and on the interplay between its oral and literate institutions, predates the work of modern interpreters by almost two and a half millennia. The insights of such media analysts as Ong and Eric Havelock were anticipated by ancient authors themselves. It is with considerable irony that those authors view the logocentric dramas of the oral culture they inhabit. They present their representations of oral discourse in an art and medium of writing whose presence as such is conspicuous. Writing that represents oral discourse is legion. But within that multitude there is an important category of texts distinguished by the fact that they represent “oral discourse”—in scare quotes.

Texts in this category don’t mediate the imitation of speech through a transparent or translucent screen of writing. Rather they call attention to themselves *as* writing—as works inscribed in a different medium, the medium of graphic signs rather than bodily or vocal signs. They imitate the characteristics of speech-centered performance and the strategies and rituals of face-to-face interaction. But they do this from “outside” the medium imitated. They’re written in a manner that interrogates the effects of oral culture on the production of meaning. It’s from this standpoint that I approach the writings of Thucydides and Plato.

In the agonistic and logocentric climate of the polis, Thucydides saw only two ways to sustain established institutions, the persuasive power of speech, and the exemplary power of the charismatic leader. *The Peloponnesian War* details the corruption of the former and presents this decay in part as a function of the structural instability of the leadership role. The eulogy of Pericles suggests that the limits of charismatic authority derive from and inevitably overcome its strength—the strength of personal influence in the face-to-face encounters of public life. When Pericles died, the Athenians ignored his advice, gave in to private ambitions and interests, and ended “by committing even the conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude.”¹⁵

Broadening the base of political participation produced a crisis of legitimacy that was never satisfactorily resolved at the institutional level. Pericles dominated his fellow citizens in spite of rather than because of his aristocratic connections, which were always suspect and got him in trouble. The kind of loyalty, the long-term morality, that households, lineages, and clans could command was only sporadically elicited by the polis.

Athenian-style democracy was geared to encourage ethical action, that is, a more active mode of participation and cooperation demanding more intelligence, more self-discipline, more conscious decision-making in the effort to minimize the ever-present dangers of diffidence, fear, and self-interest. This mode correlates with face-to-face politics and charismatic individualism. The apparent failure of the Athenian experiment at the end of the fifth century was a message to many that the time had come to replace face-to-face leadership with command systems that worked from behind the back.

In the *Republic*, Socrates deploys the method of dialogue to show that the city being founded in words is the city *his interlocutors* want but not the city *he* wants. The only time he calls it by the name commentators pick up on occurs in Book 7. Speaking to Glaucon he refers to “*your* fair (or fine) city” (*kallipolei soi*, 527c). The *Republic* makes it clear that Socrates respects the brothers’ desire to follow him to Kallipolis. But it is equally clear about this: as far as Socrates is concerned, *he* is following *them*, and in his view the city they want him to build for them should not be called Kallipolis, the Beautiful City. If Socrates were to confer on the city he builds in words the name that would best characterize his account, that name would be Aischropolis, or Uglytown. In the present chapter and in those that follow, I’ll try to justify this assertion.

Plato was not the first critic of the speech-centered culture of the Athenians. He was anticipated by Thucydides. Although Thucydides obviously cherished the Athenian commitment to public speech, at least until Cleon replaced Pericles, he wouldn’t entrust his own account to a narrative that faithfully imitated Athenian practices of oral performance.

This reluctance is expressly marked by a rhetorical gesture. Thucydides dramatizes the dangers of speech in the democratic polis by refusing to transcribe it in the forms of oral performance most characteristic of that polis: “it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one’s memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions.”¹⁶

The brazenness of this confession only increases when he mordantly concedes that he adhered “as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said” (1.22). This decision dissociates and safeguards the author’s *ēthos* from that of the rhetorical performances he documents. He replaces them with paraphrases expressing what he, the narrator, thinks should or would have been said in the situation being described.

In the contrast he draws between Athens and Sparta, the emphasis falls on the difficulty as well as the rewards of the democratic ideal. At the heart of this argument is the conviction that democracy’s need for a more active structure of participation and cooperation from all hands brings with it a greater ethical burden. Public discussion, public debate, is the alternative to plotting in secret. It is the proper way to avoid faction, keep in touch, and socialize differences. But in a democratic polity more dependent on the authority of charisma than on that of other institutions, the practice of logography only increases the dangers of contention, faction, and apprehension.

Thucydides has Pericles appeal to the *culture* of Athens—the school of Hellas—rather than to its *institutions*. And yet, in spite of his critique of logocentric writing, his own logography centers on the quasi-fictive portrayal of heroic acts of oratory. Because the spotlight Thucydides throws on Pericles is edged with the shadows of a darkening future, the way his writing lingers over these passages of rhetorical mimesis produces a complex performative effect, at once poignant, nostalgic, and bitter. But as logographic imitations of speech-making, these passages still compete with the poets and “mere orators” Thucydides claims to overgo.

The Peloponnesian War is about the undoing of a political culture committed to charismatic authority and logocentric practices. Thucydides depicts its slackening hold on the minds and hearts of its population by representing a series of orators caught in the downward pull of factional discourse, the discourse of a democracy that gives preeminence to “speech over all other instruments of power.”¹⁷ The Greek word that best describes this loss of tone is *lysis*, which means loosening, slackening of bonds. The increasingly corrosive atmosphere of post-Periclean Athens makes the ability to speak well more important even as the credibility of speech and speakers becomes more suspect.

Lysis is the title given to one of Plato’s dialogues, and it is named after one of two boys with whom Socrates conducts a discussion of friendship. The discussion centers on problematic relations between fathers and sons. Socrates shows how *Lysis* is actually enslaved by his father while being

mystified into thinking he is free. He's made to believe his *paideia*—the upbringing and education his father provides for him—will make him powerful and independent, whereas its latent function is to inscribe as indelibly as possible into his soul the values and beliefs of the older generation.

The common noun *lysis* is formed from a verb (*luō*) that carries a range of positive and negative meanings: to unbind, unfasten, release, liberate; to slacken, loosen, relax; to weaken, enervate, break up, dissolve; to destroy, undo, put an end to. One message of Plato's *Lysis* is that when Athenian fathers pretend to befriend their sons by releasing them to the future, they are really tightening the bonds that imprison them in the past.

How they do this is detailed in the *Protagoras* when the sophist describes the method of *paideia* advocated and practiced by those in power:

As soon as a child can understand what is said to him, nurse, mother, tutor, and the father himself vie with each other to make him as good as possible, instructing him through everything he does or says, pointing out, "This is right and that is wrong, this honorable and that disgraceful, this holy, that impious; do this, don't do that." If he is obedient, well and good. If not, they straighten him with threats and beatings, like a warped and twisted plank. (325c–d)

The aim of this *paideia* is to produce replicas "of the good men of old" and to impose conformity by associating "bad" with punishment/pain and "good" with the pleasure and rewards of obedience.

The method centers on memorization through writing, recitation, and bodily *mimēsis*. The children "are furnished with works of good poets to read as they sit in class." They are required "to learn them off by heart: here they meet with many admonitions, many descriptions and praises and eulogies of good men in times past so that each boy may eagerly imitate them and yearn to become like them" (325e–26a).

Through this procedure several moral attitudes or discourses are inscribed in the boys. There is, for example, a discourse of piety (*eusebeia*) that rationalizes impious actions or behavior motivated by fear and apprehensiveness. There is a discourse of reverence (*aidōs*) that allows one to reunderstand the *fear of* public opinion as the *respect for* public opinion. There are discourses that keep the oral performer going in the sense that they help him preserve self-esteem in the face of motives or behavior he might deem shameful and unjust.¹⁸

The most important and comprehensive discourse, the one that embraces all those just mentioned, the one on which both Thucydides and Plato focus, is the discourse of *pleonexia*. In Thucydides's lexicon, *pleonexia* is a key term for what ails Hellenic society, and it has a similar eminence in the dialogues. I'll creep up on its meaning by way of a strange etymological connection Socrates makes in Book 3 of the *Republic*.

Socrates has been talking about the uses of music and, more generally, of *mousikē*, the resources of the Muses, in the early stages of training called *paideia*. Poets and all other craftsmen, he insists, must be compelled to inscribe the founders' values on the warriors' environment. For this purpose, musical *paideia* is "most powerful" (*kyriōtatē*) because "rhythm and harmony most of all insinuate themselves into the inmost part of the soul and most vigorously lay hold of it in bringing grace [*euschēmosynēn*] with them; and they make one graceful if he is correctly reared; if not, the opposite" (401d–e).

The combined suggestions of sneakiness, violence, and political mastery give this description an uneasy edge—as if the soul has to be assaulted and infiltrated—and call for a closer look at the word Jowett, Shorey, and Bloom translate as "grace." The word is *euschēmosynē*, and it means "having good *schēma*." *Schēma* in various contexts means form, shape, outward appearance, figure, bearing, stateliness, fashion, the constitution or state of a thing, and finally, a figure in dancing.

Socrates uses this term in a manner that crystallizes the image of a good dancer and that connotes not only the outward bearing of a gentleman (*kalos te k'agathos*, 402a) but also the inward formation of certain socially charged aesthetic and moral preferences. *Schēma* is connected to *echō*, *echein*, "to have," and its root meaning is having, holding, possessing. *Euschēmosynē* connotes having good having, good holding(s), good possessing. But it gets its force from the etymological kinship between *schēma* and *pleonexia*, to which I finally turn.

Pleonexia has often been reductively translated or understood as "greed," but its sense in the dialogues is more complicated. The verb form, *pleonektein*, means to overreach, to get the better of, to have or get the advantage over another. If *pleonexia* literally means "having more" (*pleon echein*), Socratic usage changes its spin from an objective description to a subjective state, a condition of desire. *Pleonexia* means not only having more but also *wanting* to have more; wanting to be bigger, better, superior. If you are driven by *pleonexia*, you never have enough because you aspire to total