

Max Statkiewicz

Rhapsody of Philosophy: Dialogues with Plato in Contemporary Thought.

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In the 1970s, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Julia Kristeva, and many others all seemed to embrace Deleuze's claim that 'the task of modern philosophy is to overturn Platonism'. But did they all agree with Deleuze when he argued that Plato himself pointed the way toward a reversal of Platonism? How Plato himself pointed out the direction for the reversal of Platonism is the main question at stake in Statkiewicz's book, which revolves around the notion of a 'rhapsodic dialogue' articulated by Plato in the third book of the *Republic*. In his introduction Statkiewicz defines this notion as follows: 'I call this dialogue "rhapsodic", in reference to the profession, or rather *vocation*, of the rhapsode-engaged, like the *Ion* but also Homer and Hesiod and even Plato himself, in a "chain" of magnetic, enthused "rings" transmitting voices to one another—and in reference to the very etymology of the word, the verb *rhaptein* (to stitch together, even apparently heterogeneous elements such as rigor and play, image and simulacrum, identity and difference, philosophy and poetry), as well as the noun *rhabdos* (a wand born by the *rhapsōidos*), marking the rhythm of his performance' (3). According to Statkiewicz, the performance of philosophical dialogue as rhapsody allows us to see that philosophy will always be Platonic, and that rather than attempting to overturn Platonism, we need to think more seriously about 'what takes place in Plato, with Plato'. The performance of dialogue governs Plato's work, which should therefore be understood as 'a dialogue/confrontation between poetry and philosophy rather than as a condemnation of the former by the latter' (8).

The book consists of four chapters: 1) 'Platonic Theatre, Rigor and Play in the *Republic*'; 2) '*Le beau Jeu*, The Play of Beauty and Truth in the *Phaedrus* (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida)'; 3) 'The Notion of (Re)Semblance in the *Sophist* (Deleuze, Foucault, Nancy)'; and 4) 'The Abyssal Ground of World and Discourse in the *Timaeus* (Kristeva, Irigaray, Butler, Derrida). In the first chapter, Statkiewicz emphasizes the role of Socrates as narrative ego, an overbearing presence that often establishes the mimetic peculiarity of Platonic dialogues with the continuous alternation between *akribeia* and *mimesis* (these often being considered two distinct domains). Fifth century Athens was largely an oral culture, and the majority of Athenians were exposed to Homeric poems through the recitations of rhapsodes. The rhapsodic recitations were so popular that—as one can read in Xenophon's *Symposium*—Niceratus' father is said to have listened to rhapsodic performances every day. Plato seemed to think that by making the recitation of Homer their profession, the rhapsodes were furthering a pedagogical ideal that was harmful and ethically damaging. And yet Plato's apparent condemnation of poetry in the tenth book of the *Republic* cannot be taken at face value. Perhaps the Platonic attack is instrumental, i.e., a mere means to an end; perhaps it is an interruption of the sovereignty

of myth; perhaps it is part of a strategy for a general assault on tradition. Statkiewicz raises these questions in the context of the work of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, giving a new twist to the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry.

In the second chapter, Statkiewicz deals with the play of beauty and truth as it emerges in the *Phaedrus*. If some thinkers, such as Emmanuel Levinas and Leon Robin, have seen the *Phaedrus* as a great dialogue, Heidegger seems to ignore its rhapsodic, poetic, half-playful and half-serious character. Derrida, on the other hand, reunites the notions of truth and play in his remarks on Nietzsche's *Spurs*, suggesting that 'such a play can only be fully understood within the context of the opposition between the supposed rigor of scientific discourse and the rhapsodic mode of Plato's and Nietzsche's writing' (29). In his exemplary and original interpretation of the *Phaedrus*, Derrida discovers the overturning of Platonism by means of the key notion of *φάρμακον*: 'on the one hand, what we called earlier the logic of the rigorous definition of concept (*akribeia*) attempts to sort out the various meanings of the same word in order to preserve their identity; on the other hand, the logic of play (*paidia*) tends to maintain the ambiguity, the communication between meanings, in particular within the unity of the same signifier' (93). Through multiple plays of words—*φάρμακον* can mean a remedy as well as a drug or poison—Derrida's play consists in a sort of collapsing into a series of binaries: Theuth and his father, and by implication, writing and speech; Plato's story and the Egyptian father; Plato's story and the Egyptian myth; and philosophy and mythology.

In the third chapter Statkiewicz deals with the *Sophist*, artfully raising the difference between image and simulacrum, philosopher and sophist and the question of whether it is paradoxical for a sophist to condemn sophistry. It is not an accident that *Being and Time* begins with a lengthy quotation from the *Sophist*. The challenge of the *Sophist* is so radical that many contemporary thinkers have returned to this dialogue in order to overturn Platonism. With regard to the Platonic method of division, making constant reference to Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* Statkiewicz writes that 'Deleuze does not take [Platonic] division in its traditional Aristotelian interpretation, namely, as a lame syllogism, lacking a middle term and thus unable to determine exactly the species of a genus to which the object of an investigation should belong' (106). For Deleuze, division is not a dialectic of contradiction, but a dialectic of rivalry, a dispute.

Statkiewicz begins the fourth chapter with the claim that 'the ontological categories of *Republic*, even in the form of their sophisticated redefinition in the *Sophist*, might not resist the unsettling of wordly emplacement of the *Khora*'. According to Derrida the *khora* contains the seeds of the overturning of Platonism. Statkiewicz reminds us that prior to Derrida Julia Kristeva was one of the first to consider the *khora* as the most provocative challenge to the logocentric tradition, and the first to interpret *khora* 'as an indeterminate structuration of semiosis, always accompanied by the contrary movement of deconstruction, played an important role in giving the problematic of the chora a significance exceeding the limits of Plato scholarship' (133). In Greek *khora* means 'place' in several very different senses: place in general, the receptacle, the residence, the place where we live, and a pre-phenomenal, indefinite, non-site where inscriptions are set or erased. According to Statkiewicz, *khora* is something Plato cannot

fully assimilate into his own thought. It is a singularly unique place, the radical antecedent, something that cannot be represented, except negatively. *Khora* is neither the mother, nor the nurse who nurtures infants; it is a kind of hybrid being, not exactly the void, and it is atemporal. It is the spacing which is the condition for everything to take place, to be inscribed. In other words, *khora* is the place of a third kind, neither substance nor non-substance (music and language are analogous), neither present nor absent. It is disseminative, proliferating forms, types, and patterns. It is anterior to the law of contradiction and breaks with the logic of ontology well established already in Aristotle. It goes back toward the pre-origin.

This book is dense, original and rich. It is to be welcomed both for its serious engagement with Plato's dialogues and for its involvement in contemporary thought. To be sure, many dialogues pose special puzzles, and confront the reader with argumentative and non-argumentative (mimetic) passages. Statkiewicz is surely right when he claims that the rhapsody of philosophy has received less attention than it should, and that this aspect of Plato's dialogues has been under-recognized. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the notion of 'rhapsodic mimesis' is overly conservative, even parasitic. As a form of repetition, it risks undoing the critical distance that characterizes philosophy, subordinating philosophy to poetry. Yes, a dialogue is different from a treatise. But, in the continuous alternation between *akribeia* and *mimesis*, when Plato's thought is taken to harden into a systematic rhapsodic mode, his dramatic writing still amounts to a kind of treatise.

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