

PLATO, HERACLITUS AND DANTE ON AMBIGUITY

Some notes to Prof. Smith's paper

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Professor Smith's paper takes the sixth book of *Aeneid* as *manifesto* of the ability of the poetry to represent the ambiguity. This is a very interesting choice. If I have correctly understood the purpose of Smith's paper, the case of Virgil allows us to bring to light the difficulties of philosophy when it tries to talk about the ambiguity of the reality. Virgil is instead able to represent a very contradictory and ambiguous otherworldly dimension, in which the human and the non-human are mixed together. Not only the great Latin poet is not afraid to speak of ambiguity, but his poetry has a linguistic baggage and very refined expressive tools to do it. Virgil does not think we should dissolve the ambiguity with the power of the *logos*. This attitude is not shared by many ancient (and not only ancient) philosophers: certainly not by Plato.

Smith's paper starts with a quote from a famous passage in Plato's *Republic* about the ontological *status* of the empirical things. In this note I intend to discuss this passage in order to show that Plato conceives philosophy as the overcoming of the ambiguity of reality by the power of *logos*. Furthermore I mean to present very briefly (and incompletely) a sketch about the difference between Virgil's Polydorus and Dante's Pier Delle Vigne, in order to show that Pier is more ambiguous and more uncanny than Polydorus.

In the fifth book of the *Republic* Plato is committed to show that there is a not remediable difference between the philosopher and the philodoxer. Who is the philodoxer? Surely, as the word suggests, he is a δόξα (opinion) lover. But this specification is tautological. So, who loves the δόξα? Plato's answer (475d) is that the philodoxers are φιλοθεάμονες and φιλήκοοι. These two terms are likely to be neologisms, as the following φιλοτέχνους (476a). They are constructed in consonance with the term φιλόσοφος, but opposite to it. The φιλοθεάμονες are those who love the shows (i.e. the theater); the φιλήκοοι are those loving conversation, discourses, rhetorical and sophistical ostentation; finally, the φιλοτέχνους are those who very appreciate art in general. In sum, the philodoxer is a canonical figure in the Athens of the Fifth Century b.C., a sort of intellectual strongly linked with the democratic culture of the *polis*. Plato identifies and taunts this kind of intellectual in Hippias, who is not able to think philosophically, as can be seen from the dialogues dedicated to him¹. To our contemporary readers the contrast between the philosopher and the lover of the shows may appear bizarre. But the democratic Athens was a *theatrocracy* and the poets were intended as educators of the city. For my purpose it is therefore interesting that in the *locus* indicated by Prof. Smith Plato contrasts the knowledge of the philosopher to that of poetry's lovers. Obviously, according to Plato they have not knowledge. But the philodoxer is sure to have it, so it is necessary to debate with him. He has not a gentle soul and does not accept the philosophical refutation, the *elenchos*. So it is impossible to discuss philosophically with him. Glaucon therefore wears the mask of the philodoxer and he discusses with Socrates about his (i.e. philodoxer's) alleged knowledge. The focus of the argument (476e4-477b11) is to disclose to the

¹ Cfr. Platone, *La Repubblica*, a cura di M. Vegetti, BUR, Milano 2006, pp. 722-723, n. 71.

philodoxer that what he calls «knowledge» actually is «opinion», that it is not knowledge and that it cannot be knowledge. The argument runs as follows:

1. who knows, knows something that is;
2. what is not, can not be known;
3. what completely is (παντελῶς ὄν), it is completely knowable (παντελῶς γνωστόν); what in no way is (μὴ ὄν μηδαμῆ), it's totally unknowable (πάντη ἄγνωστον);
4. if something is and is not at the same time, it is intermediate between what purely is and what is not at all (μεταξὺ ἂν κείτοιο τοῦ εἰλικρινῶς ὄντος καὶ τοῦ αὐτῆ μηδαμῆ ὄντος);
5. knowledge refers to being, while ignorance to not being, for what is intermediate between being and not being there must be something that is intermediate between knowledge and ignorance (μεταξύ τι καὶ ζητητέον ἀγνοίας τε καὶ ἐπιστήμης);
6. because opinion is something, and it is different from knowledge, its object will be different from that of knowledge and that of ignorance;
7. if there is something intermediate between being and not being, i.e. between knowledge and ignorance, that is the object of the opinion.

What is intermediate between being and not being? The sensible objects. The ontological status of the sensible objects is structurally ambiguous, according to Plato, and Prof. Smith is right to emphasize the expression τὸ ἀμφοτέρων μετέχον, τοῦ εἶναι τε καὶ μὴ εἶναι (478e1-2): «[sensible objects] participate *both* of being and not being». This is the key of the whole passage. Plato resorts to a very particular verb in *Resp.* 479b10, when he writes that the particulars seem to ἐπαμφοτερίζουσιν. The verb ἐπαμφοτερίζω means «to be double» in the sense of «play a double game», «partake to both kinds», «be two-faced». Thucydides, for example, uses it (VIII 85, 3) to speak about person who are two-faced, ambiguous in action and thinking. In Aristotle the verb acquires a taxonomic meaning: «having characters of two different species» (like the seals). The focal meaning of these uses is the ambiguity of what «plays a double game».

According to Plato the reality is self-contradictory. Probably Smith's suggestion that Heidegger might have translated τὸ ἀμφοτέρων μετέχον as *gleichsprünglich* is right, but in Plato the meaning is more likely to «be two-faced». Prof. Smith asks:

and how can we find ways to interpret the equivocal, questionable, and self-contradictory “reality” – “It is, is it not?” – that we experience as we move down from sense perception through sleep and dreams to “touch upon” death? Might not this descent toward ultimate indeterminacy characterize most adequately an inescapable dimension of our factual human condition? If so, what is the kind of speech that would allow us to say what we encounter in this experience?

Plato's position is peculiar, also in relation to Virgil. The ambiguity is not placed at a lower level than that perceivable, but in the tangible world. Our experience of the world is, according to Plato, irremediably ambiguous. *Resp.*

VII 534-cd - a passage that Smith quotes - is quite evidently a proof that in Plato's philosophy the condition of those who live immersed in the sensory dimension corresponds to the half-sleep and even death. It indeed affirms that who is not able to delimit in the discourse the ideas (in the text: the Beautiful), beating the rebuttals with the unshakeable force of the logical discourse, lives all his life in a sleep, slowly dying. The difference between a life entirely dedicated to perception and the death is simply temporal: in the Hades the sleep is perennial.

Why perception is so strictly banned from philosophy? The answer is the intermediate *status* between being and not being of which it is said. The enigma of the eunuch quoted in 479c is the puerile but incisive depiction of the ambiguity of the empirical things: they are and they are not what they are. The same things appear to those who look sometimes in one way and sometimes in another, in a certain sense *x* and in another *non-x*. They share contradictory properties. The empirical world is, according to Plato, Heraclitean: a perennial flux without standstill, in which everything is and not is, or better is itself and also its contradiction. The very difference between Heraclitus and Plato is that the philosopher of Ephesus believes it is the assignment of the philosopher to assume the contradiction of the world, while Plato thinks that philosophy should dissolve it. The theory of Forms is Plato's challenge to ambiguity.

Prof. Smith quotes Heraclitus fr. 26 as an opposite direction from Plato's *Republic*. Once again, I believe that Prof. Smith is right to consider fr. 26 closer to the spirit of Homer and Virgil - the sleep is death's twin - than that of Plato. Fr. 26 is of great importance in the hermeneutical interpretations of Heraclitus, curiously more than in the historical-philosophical. In the winter semester seminar of the Academic Year 1966/1967, Martin Heidegger and Eugen Fink have long discussed how to interpret fr. 26. According to Fink's interpretation, the fragment situates the man in an intermediate position between night and light. More generally, Fink - both in *Zur ontologischen Frühgeschichte von Raum-Zeit-Bewegung* (Den Haag 1957) and in *Spiel als Weltsymbol* (Stuttgart 1960) - interprets Heraclitus focusing on the concept of πῦρ (fire). It is interesting, I think, that the man of Heraclitus is, according to Fink, similar to the Centaur. The Centaur is an *ambiguous* creature, half man and half horse. Heidegger declares the text of the fragment given by Clement of Alexandria incomprehensible, because he introduces the fragment speaking about τὴν ἀπόστασιν τῆς ψυχῆς, but there is nothing about it in the fragment. Both Fink and Heidegger consider essential to the understanding of the fragment the verb ἄπτεσθαι, that Prof. Smith emphasizes. Gadamer also considers it important. Unlike Heidegger, Gadamer thinks that Clement remark about τὴν ἀπόστασιν τῆς ψυχῆς is *einen klaren Hinweis* about the correspondence between sleep and death². There are three oppositions in the fragment: light-darkness, wakefulness-sleep, life-death. According to Gadamer, the pre-Socratic philosophy is to be read from that of Plato and Aristotle. All the interpretations that try to ig-

² *Heraklit-Studien*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Mohr, Tübingen 1991, vol. VII: *Griechische Philosophie III: Plato im Dialog*, pp. 43-82.

nore this approach are mere historicism³. But Gadamer exaggerates to put in contact the polarity of Heraclitus' thinking and *die platonische Frage nach dem Einen und Vielen*⁴. About the fr. 26, Gadamer considers crucial the Heraclitean notion of *psyche*, comparing the self-ignition of the fire and the self-movement of the Platonic soul, on the basis of the *Charmides* (169a). My impression, however, is that this will lead to a weakening of the ambiguity unwelcome to Heraclitus.

The most powerful and evocative depiction of the ambiguity in the sixth book of *Aeneides* is, according to me, the characterization of the golden bough. I want to emphasize in particular the following verses (145-148):

*ergo alte vestige oculis et rite repertum
carpe manu; namque ipse volens facilisque sequetur,
si te fata vocant; aliter non viribus ullis
vincere nec duro poteris convellere ferro.*

The Cumaean Sybil is speaking about a bough. It is obviously strange that it is golden and it shines in the dark. But the most incredible linguistic twisting is the participle *volens*: the bough has a will, can decide whether or not to follow Aeneas' hand. The ambiguity of the enigma «a man... not a man...» is here manifest. We are in the sixth book, so these lines can not fail to remind to the reader what he has read in the third book about Polydorus. Son of Priam and Hecuba, Polydorus is now transformed into a shrub, and Aeneas meets him in this disturbing appearance. I don't know another passage in Western literature in which the sense of alienation and ambiguity of a-man-not-a-man is stronger than in this Virgil's book. Except, as I will explain further, in Dante's *Inferno*. The golden bough appears invincible, while Polydorus is terribly vulnerable. The bough has a will, but does not suffer as a man, whom Aeneas tears three times the branches, weeps and bleeds. More than anything else, he cries and begs.

Prof. Smith mentions Dante in a note, but if my reference to Polydorus as the highest manifestation of ambiguity in Virgil (and not only in Virgil) is correct, I think it is impossible not to recall here the thirteenth canto of Dante's *Inferno*. Dante has in fact understood that the alienation that the reader feels in front of Polydorus is due to ambiguity of a-man-not-a-man. According to Freud, *das Unheimliche* (the *uncanny*) is that sort of frightening that goes back to what we have known for a long time, to what is familiar to us. Polydorus is surely uncanny in this sense. The sad eternal destiny of Pier Delle Vigne is uncanny too. The wood in which Dante meets Pier is intermediate between the human life and the infernal life (4-9):

*Non fronda verde, ma di color fosco;
non rami schietti, ma nodosi e 'nvolti;
non pomi v'eran, ma stecchi con tosco.
Non ha sì aspri sterpi né sì folti*

³ See *L'inizio della filosofia occidentale*, Guerini, Milano 1993, p. 14.

⁴ *Heraklit-Studien*, cit., p. 74.

*quelle fiere selvagge che 'n odio hanno
tra Cecina e Corneto i luoghi colti.*

Dante uses a well-known place in Maremma to provide a reference to the human dimension, but what he describes is not human. The first creatures that Dante and Virgil encounter are the Harpies. Dante hears «guai», but he can not see any human shadow. With an extraordinary poetic ability, Dante reports this feeling to a daily life case (25-27):

*Cred' io ch'ei credette ch'io credesse
che tante voci uscisser, tra quei bronchi,
da gente che per noi si nascondesse.*

Virgil knows the reality and so asks Dante to uproot a twig. The log screams, and Dante, terrified, understands the truth. Pier reveals without pretense his current dehumanized condition. But there is a crucial difference between Polydorus and Pier, really important for the purpose of this note. The bush has grown over Polydorus, while Pier *is* the shrub. Pier's soul is now a shrub, all the essence of Pier is now his prison. The great Italian critic Francesco De Sanctis described in a mighty way Pier's condition⁵: he is now a shrub, nothing in his physiognomy is human, but one profoundly human thing is preserved in him: the memory. De Sanctis writes: «essa è qualche cosa di vivente che non è lui, o che piuttosto è l'antico lui: egli è un tronco». With this amazing variation on Virgil's page, Dante reveals himself a poet of unparalleled power. If the condition of a-man-not-a-man is the manifesto of ambiguity, Dante's Pier Delle Vigne is even more ambiguous and uncanny than Virgil's Polydorus.

⁵ *Saggi critici*, a cura di L. Russo, Bari 1952, vol. I, pp. 116-119.