

Socrates the Degenerate: Irony as Trope of Decadence

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Daniel R. Adler,

"Socrates the Degenerate: Irony as Trope of Decadence"

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Abstract: Decadence is typically associated with a fall from, or an opposition to, ideals of civilization. Western Civilization traditionally traces its roots to the culture of Ancient Greece. While theorists of periodicity from Vico to Nietzsche and Deleuze, to Hayden White and other contemporary scholars, associate decadence with excess, artificiality and over-indulgence, they also recognize that decadence often incorporates pre-civilized, base or "Other" tendencies. Paradoxically, decadence as a degeneration of an original culture's values can also rejuvenate that culture's core values through mutation so that a new version of the original culture arises. In literature, degeneration has also been associated with the master trope of irony. Throughout ages when language fails to capture reality, or reality and ideals clash in other ways, irony results. Self-consciousness, for example, is inherently ironic, and could be set in contrast to "Golden Age" literature, in which master tropes such as metonymy and synecdoche dominate. Perhaps one of the first instances of a decadent character in Western literature was Plato's Socrates, whose irony appears throughout the Dialogues as dissembling. If this is one of Socrates' key characteristics, could it be why philosophy has been categorized as pre- and post-Socratic? Here I examine how Socratic irony relates to degenerative aspects of Greek society; better determine what we mean by the "Western" tradition that is supposed to have begun during the fifth century; and suggest that a society, a literature, or an individual must encounter an affirmative or positive irony to turn from degeneration to regeneration.

Daniel R. ADLER

Socrates the Degenerate: Irony as Trope of Decadence

Civilization and culture are two words thrown about so often in written and spoken language that it can be hard to find succinct definitions for them. We all know what they mean, but to what, where or when these concepts point is harder to define. One of the earlier theorists of social development, Giambattista Vico, attempts this in *The New Science*, a meditation "on a science of the nature of the nations from which their humanity arose, beginning everywhere in their religions and coming to completion in their sciences, disciplines and arts" (4). Using Vico as a starting point, it becomes clearer what we mean by culture, as that trajectory which begins in religion and comes to exist as a group of sciences, disciplines and arts.

The Ancient Greeks, customarily taken to represent the origins of Western civilization, are as good a culture to study as any, specifically with regard to the arts of what we today call poetry and philosophy. The scholar Aaron Gare has noted that the formation of social institutions engenders a certain reflective instinct, which in the case of Ancient Greek civilization, by contrast to other civilizations, allowed for the specific choosing of institutions meant to uphold noble values (3). What were these noble virtues passed down in Greek education? Or perhaps a better question is, what defines nobility as opposed to baseness?

Friedrich Nietzsche answers this question one way in *Beyond Good and Evil*, where he writes that nobility has some fundamental certainty about itself, "something that cannot be sought, nor found, nor perhaps lost. *The noble soul has reverence for itself*" (227). Thus, nobility can appropriate whatever it deems good or noble. Gilles Deleuze, in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, further defines Nietzsche's nobility as based on aristocracy, action, and affirmation, and opposed to negation of life and reactive ways of being, which may manifest as cowardice, pain, weakness, accusation and resentment (119-20). Nobility by necessity distinguishes and differentiates. Deleuze writes, "What Nietzsche often calls *distinction* is the eternal character of what is affirmed..." (120). For Deleuze, Nietzsche's differentiation is closely aligned with taste, choosing, and interpretation. This does not preclude *what* is affirmed from changing, however.

In Ancient Greece, *paideia* was a form of education based on cultivating this taste or affirmation; it was a way to ready noble young men for war through physical training and the distinguishing of virtue from vice. Gare points out how the art of Ancient Greek society—especially the tragedies of Aeschylus and other early dramatists—exemplified the perils of fewer limits: *paideia* was a way of upholding those limits and values agreed upon by previous generations (4). *Paideia*, then, has a dualistic nature as both a set of limitations and impositions on noble nature, as well as a perpetuation of agreed-upon noble values. The noble, active nature is constrained by culture, which, for Nietzsche, is simply "training and selection" (Deleuze 133). While law-making, for example, is active, the following of laws is reactive. Culture, or humanity acting on humanity, is the acting out of reactive forces.

As such, culture is represented by any collectivity; the church, state, races, classes: *herds*. Culture primarily produces reactive states, not active individuals, and history, writes Deleuze, is a culture's record of how it maintains, preserves and organizes the reactive life (138-9). Yet this does not explain how cultures change. For this, Deleuze considers an idealistic, *post-historic* realm where the product of culture is the sovereign individual, the one who acts out reactive forces in his own way: "The finished product of species activity is not the responsible man himself or the moral man, but the autonomous and supramoral man, that is to say the one who actually acts his reactive forces and in whom all reactive forces are acted" (137). The active individual opposes the herd, which in its striving to perpetuate its values creates an obeying reactive man. In this striving, "Species activity in history is inseparable from a movement which perverts it and its product...it is identical to a 'degeneration of culture'" (138). Continuous reactivity degrades those original values that the nobles perpetuated through *paideia*. Within history, selective forces that perpetuate the species favor reactive man; the active man is more likely to be singled out and not survive or carry on their supramoral values. From the active man's perspective culture is degeneration of the human species. From the perspective of culture, however, the active man is degenerate for resisting culture, *for being too noble*.

Nietzsche's Problem with Socrates

Deleuze writes obliquely about Nietzsche's active men: Socrates, Christ, and Luther, how each bring about the downfall of the golden age culture that came before them: Athens, Rome, the Renaissance: "The genealogist is well aware that there is a health that only exists as the presupposition of the becoming-sick" (167). The active man represents both this health and this becoming-sick: the former as an individual, the latter as an embodiment of cultural decline. Recognizing that these active men are

themselves the first symptoms of cultural decline, we could consider them inflection points of human civilization, when the ascendant plot-line of culture peaks and changes direction. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) Nietzsche goes even farther—for him, Socrates is *the* single most critical point in history.¹ And while much has been written about Nietzsche's complicated relationship with Socrates, Drew Hyland argues that while Nietzsche's views on Socrates in his later work do not remain identical with his early work, they are *consistent* regarding how he changed Greek civilization (12).² Michael Gillespie qualifies this shift by describing how Nietzsche's goal in *Twilight of the Idols* is to "...return to the eternal idols...and subordinate them within his musical form, which is itself the form of life. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he argued that life was only justified as an aesthetic phenomenon; here he suggests that all art and aesthetics is justifiable only as an expression of ascending life" (110). "The Problem of Socrates," then, begins with how Socrates, like all "the wisest sages" (*Twilight* 12), seems to be an expression of descending life.

Socrates' last words about owing Asclepius a cock, a common form of sacrifice for a cure, indicate that he views life as an illness only death can cure. If Socrates was a life-denier, how could he be wise? Nietzsche questions whether Socrates *was* in fact wise, whether all sages who have a negative judgment of life are wise, and if wisdom implies decadence (*Twilight* 12). As Werner Dannhauser acknowledges, it is possible to speak a truth despite being a decadent (208-9). But is Socrates' statement about Asclepius suggestive of truth? In the second aphorism, Nietzsche inveighs against value-judgments about life: "Judgments, value judgments about life, for or against, can in the final analysis never be true; they have value only as symptoms...such judgments are stupidities" (*Twilight* 13). But is it not the case that Nietzsche, in calling judgments about life stupidities, is making a judgment himself? When Nietzsche asks if all the great sages are decadents or declining types, as with many of his questions in "The Problem of Socrates," he is leading himself as well as the reader to a tenuous judgment, one that does not have to be final, as we shall see by the end of this chapter, where Nietzsche revises and further complicates his notion of Socrates' decadence. As Gillespie notes, "*Twilight*, according to Nietzsche, is neither a Yes nor a No to everything it considers; in fact it says nothing at all; it does not judge" (110). Yet *Twilight's* playful aestheticism *does* do much suggesting, even if it undermines or refines these suggestions eventually. By ending this section with questions about whether all the great sages were decadents, or were even wise to begin with, Nietzsche concludes by mentioning for the first and only time, "the problem of Socrates." Dannhauser writes, "The implication is that he means to show the decadence of Socrates but not his lack of wisdom... He is wise because he quite possibly understood that the value of life cannot be estimated, and that his valuations were a function of his own decadence. The self-awareness of decadence is a kind of wisdom" (210). Thus it is possible for Socrates to be both wise and decadent.

In the next aphorism, Nietzsche writes, "Socrates belonged, in his origins, to the lowest folk" (*Twilight* 13), as demonstrated by his ugliness. Later in *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes, "Ugly things are understood as signs and symptoms of degenerescence... A hatred springs up here: who is man hating here? But there is no doubt: the *decline of his type*" (53). If the Greeks hated Socrates, it was because he did not seem to them Greek enough. In a culture that associates beauty with the good, the noble, and the ideal—these are just some of the connotations of the word *kalos*—for Socrates to be considered wise indicates a revaluation of everything a good Athenian knew to be true; Socrates indicated a separation of appearance from essence. A physiognomist arrives in Athens and, "...said to his face that he *was a monstrum*—that he contained all bad vices and cravings within him. And Socrates simply

¹ "Once we see clearly how after Socrates, the mystagogue of science, one philosophical school succeeds another, wave upon wave; how the hunger for knowledge reached a never-suspected universality in the widest domain of the educated world, became the real task for every person of higher gifts, and led science onto the high seas from which it has never again been driven altogether; how this universality first spread a common net of thought over the whole globe, actually holding out the prospect of the lawfulness of an entire solar system; once we see all this clearly, along with the amazingly high pyramid of knowledge in our time—we cannot fail to see in Socrates the one turning-point and vortex of so-called world history. For if we imagine that the whole incalculable sum of energy used up for this world tendency had been used not in the service of knowledge but for the practical, i.e., egoistic aims of individuals and peoples, then we realize that in that case universal wars of annihilation and continual migrations of peoples would probably have weakened the instinctive lust for life to such an extent that suicide would have become a general custom and individuals might have experienced the final remnant of a sense of duty when, like the inhabitants of the Fiji Islands, they had strangled their parents and friends—a practical pessimism that might have generated a gruesome ethic of genocide motivated by pity..."

² I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for directing my attention to this article as well as a number of others referenced throughout this and the following section.

answered, "You know me, sir!" (13). But Socrates is a master of himself, he can contain all those contradictory impulses, and channel all of his instincts into reason. In this sense, Nietzsche writes that the equation "reason=virtue=happiness" (13), denies those instincts based on taste and differentiation which noble Athenians relied upon. In the pre-Socratic world, authority was enough to give reason; it came from within, "But the philosophers are the decadents of Hellenism, the counter-movement against the ancient, noble taste (against the agonal instinct, against the polis, against the value of breeding, against the authority of convention)" (78). In such a culture, to have to give reasons for oneself is a show of weakness: "Whatever has to get itself proved in advance isn't worth much" (14). The Athenian noble, forced to justify himself to Socrates, to provide a definition to the question "What is...?" can be easily confounded through logic and contradiction. This type of thinking was vastly different from a reliance on the particulars of types, which, according to Nietzsche, was acceptable in noble Athenian society before an era of sophistry. Socrates indicates a new taste—a taste against decaying noble instincts, a capacity to contain his own base impulses through reason alone. Dialectic ignores the question "Which one?" for the question "What is?" In the latter there is always posed an opposite quality to that which is defined, which is essentially negative and reactive. For Nietzsche, the multiplicity and typological differentiation which he associates with the noble taste of the pre-Socratic age is directly opposed to the dialectical and oft-ironic mode of Socratic questioning, the move to reduce, define, and contradict. This dialectical method that led Socrates to seem wise to the Ancient Greeks is also, according to Nietzsche, what makes him unwise, or degenerate, for its overreliance on reason as opposed to instinct. For Nietzsche, "To have to fight against the instincts—this is the formula for decadence: so long as life is ascendant, happiness is instinct" (15). When life is degenerating, reason must be used to pit the instincts against each other, to sort them. But when life is ascendant, it is enough to follow instinct to be happy. As Walter Kauffman writes, defining Socratism as the outlook Socrates embodies (399), "Socratism itself is decadent and cannot produce a real cure; by thwarting death it can only make possible an eventual regeneration which may not come about for centuries. Socrates himself realized this: "In the wisdom of his courage to die, he recognized that for himself no ultimate cure was possible—except death (407)." Socrates is not a life-denier or nihilist as much as he recognizes the formula that "reason=virtue=happiness" is a delusion, and that at least *for him*, death is the only solution: "Socrates is no doctor...Socrates himself has just been sick for a long time..." (*Twilight* 17).

The Paradox of Socrates

In *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche describes how ascetic values are one way of fighting against the instincts, how they can be a form of life-denial, depending on one's type. Certain types can benefit from decadence by pushing beyond the life-denial that can culminate in nihilism. As Nietzsche writes, "...man would much rather will *nothingness* than not *will*..." (118). Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche defines how the life-negating forces of dialectical reactivity can lead to nihilism, but nihilism does not have to end in a will to nothingness. When pushed to its extreme, nihilism can become positive: "Reactive forces break their alliance with the will to nothingness, the will to nothingness, in turn, breaks its alliance with reactive forces. It inspires in man a new inclination: for destroying himself, but destroying himself actively" (174). The will to nothingness succeeds and from it grows a will to power—a Dionysian affirmation, an active destruction: "Negation *sacrifices* all reactive forces, becoming 'relentless destruction of everything that was degenerating and parasitical' passing into an excess of life, only here is it completed" (175). Deleuze writes that the one who seeks active destruction is not a nihilist, but rather a bridge to the Overhuman, and in this sense wants to be overcome. If Socrates recognized in himself symptoms of degeneracy—of instinct-denial and the inadequacy of reason as a means to happiness—then we can interpret his drinking the hemlock as active destruction. Through this Deleuzian lens, Socrates' statement about owing Asclepius a cock can lead us to read him as the first active man, as a bridge to the Overhuman.

The paradoxical, duplicitous elements of active and reactive can apply to almost any term, including degeneracy, which like terms such as culture, nobility and nihilism, can indicate life-denial for the individual while being indicative of an affirmation for their culture at large—or contrarily, a denial of the culture for the affirmation of the individual. Reading Socrates as the former can elucidate how Jacques Derrida famously read Socrates as *pharmakos*, wizard as well as scapegoat, a gift as well as a poison, a curse and a savior. Derrida cites the classicist J.P. Vernant in a footnote in "Plato's Pharmacy":

In the person of the ostracized, the city expels what in it is too elevated, what incarnates the evil which can come to it from above. In the evil of the *pharmakos*, it expels what is the vilest in itself, what incarnates the evil that menaces it from below. By this double and complementary rejection it delimits itself in relation to

what is not yet known and what transcends the known: it takes the proper measure of the human in opposition on one side to the divine and heroic, on the other to the bestial and monstrous. (131)

Socrates' mode of dialectic and reliance on reason could be both what is "too elevated" as well as the "evil that menaces it from below." A way of approximating truth by ordering the instincts, reason preserved Greek culture, even if it was delusionally predicated on being the only means to happiness. Nietzsche recognizes this as he moves through "The Problem of Socrates." He writes, "I have made it understandable how Socrates was fascinating... (*Twilight* 15) and "I have made it understandable how Socrates could be repulsive (16)." His tactics are not dialectical; Nietzsche demonstrates his own instinctive line of reasoning, which is based in part on examining "The Problem of Socrates" from multiple angles. Socrates could understandably be both divine and heroic, as well as bestial and monstrous—his death represents an active and reactive moment for Athenian society and this duplicitous interpretation is exactly what makes him so problematic for Nietzsche—on one hand, Socrates is the beginning of the end for the Greek society Nietzsche so admires; on the other, he is exemplary for an individualism grounded in degeneracy. As James I. Porter writes, "The point is not just that Socrates can be said to be ambivalently admired or detested by Nietzsche—say, that he is admired for some reasons and detested for others. It is that Nietzsche constructs Socrates as despicable and admirable here *for the very same reasons*" (410). Socrates can be a contradiction, a paradox and an irony, and Nietzsche's many questions—often left answered—*make understandable* this interpretation and encourage his readers to create their own.

As opposed to the dialectical manner of evaluation, Nietzsche's interpretive mode is inherently fluid and ironic—Alexander Nehamas goes so far as to call Nietzsche's style "essentially hyperbolic" (31). He notes that Nietzsche disdains the dogmatism of Socrates and Plato: "He wants to be believed, but not unconditionally; even more, he does not want to *appear* to want to be believed unconditionally (33). To read Nietzsche as Nehamas does raises suspicions about the truth-value of his hyperbolic claims, and encourages re-reading and reevaluation. The answer to "which one?" is always multiple, based on a reader's type, values, and ultimately, their nobility. And even if Nehamas' claim about Nietzsche's style is *itself* hyperbolic, hyperbole can be classified as a sub-type of the master trope that Socrates came to represent, and which Nietzsche imitates so well.

From Dialectic to Irony

The Delphic oracle's prophecy about Socrates as the wisest man in Greece must have seemed strange to Athenians. Socrates tried to prove the oracle wrong through his persistent questioning of those who were supposed to be experts, his attempts to show that they knew more than he, but in doing so he proved that they did not know what they professed to, and that at least he knew what he did not know. Through dialectic, Socrates' reputation for wisdom is based on knowing nothing.³ By pressing for reasoning, the dialectician allows the reactive condition of life to *seem active*. This *seeming* is a reevaluation that is inherently ironic—indeed, any reevaluation is ironic, according to Hayden White's definition of irony, based "...in its apprehension of the capacity of language to obscure more than it clarifies in any act of verbal figuration" (*Metahistory* 37). Such obscuring encourages active interpretation. Could we not say that irony is, in a way, *dialectically opposed to dialectic*, its negative counterpart, reveling in uncertainty and ambiguity as opposed to the hard definitions dialectic seeks? If dialectic is a "symptom of decadence," (Nietzsche, *Twilight* 8) then isn't irony also? Perhaps we can answer these questions by tracing the history of the term.

Originally a stock character in Aristophanes, the *Eiron* is one who dissembles.⁴ It makes sense that irony would grow from Old Comedy, due to their close relationship. The Socrates Aristophanes depicts in *The Clouds* is more comic than ironic, for example, in part because he is not the play's hero. Driven out of society, forced to jump out of the window of his burning school and chased out of town by stone-throwing slaves, Socrates is represented as *pharmakos* thirty years before he drinks the hemlock. But

³ See Plato's *Apology*. 20d-23.

⁴ Gregory Vlastos notes that the first uses of *eiron* occur in Aristophanes, and later in the *Sophist*, when Plato refers to sophists as impostors; that Socrates is depicted ironically in Xenophon's *Symposium*; but not until Plato is Socrates' behavior *defined* as *eironokos*, translated as 'pretending'. Vlastos also claims that from Plato's depiction of Socrates we come to our understanding of the word irony as represented by Quintilian: "that figure of speech or trope in which something contrary to what is said is supposed to be understood," (Vlastos 21) as opposed to what in Attic usage equated to dissembling, and carried only negative connotations. While Vlastos explicitly treats the term *eiron* and the change of its meaning from Plato's to Quintilian's time, here my concern is more with a more general genealogical trajectory of the term, from its emergence and unprecedentedness to the repercussions of seeing irony as a master trope, as representative of an era's language.

in *The Clouds* Socrates is an object of ridicule and a sophist, an *alazōn*, a blustering know-it-all. Northrop Frye's category of ironic tragedy designates the *ieron*, the one who pretends to know nothing, in opposition to the *alazōn* (40). In *The Clouds*, for example, Socrates' punishment outweighs his crime, and this is funny. Frye calls this the comic counterpart to the irony of Plato's *Apology* (46). There, Socrates' punishment outweighs his actions; tragic irony relies on the scapegoat, the *pharmakos*, who is both guilty and innocent: "If there is a reason for choosing him for catastrophe, it is an inadequate reason, and raises more objections than it answers," (Frye 41). The difference between comedy and irony depends on the gap between our reality and our ideal: in irony, it is greater because we have not yet acted. Irony is only possible before action or knowledge, while comedy—laughter—comes after action. In this sense, truth that comes too late is ironic. Henri Bergson further distinguishes irony from comedy: "Sometimes we state what ought to be done, and pretend to believe that this is just what is actually being done; then we have irony. Sometimes, on the contrary, we describe with scrupulous minuteness what is being done, and pretend to believe that this is just what ought to be done; such is often the method of humour" (40a). Frye calls Socrates' trial and death tragic Dionysiac—the death of a god. In Plato's dialogues, with his philosophical father as protagonist, the reader enters into the realm of "...ironic myth, a story of how the god of one person is the *pharmakos* of another..." (43). By martyring Socrates over the course of his oeuvre, Plato's fictional mode becomes increasingly ironic, as it allows society to see itself in reflection. That is after all what the social gadfly does: present opportunities to teach society about itself, to question basic values, especially those of haughty, pretentious *alazōnes*. When the gadfly acts and it's not funny, it is ironic for indicating the dawning of a realization, a truth realized after illusion.

Socrates' death is only another of his great ironies. To invoke Derrida again, we may better understand how the *pharmakon* can be the ultimate irony, a total paradox—both and nothing, embodying that which is *and* its opposite: "Conceived within this original reversibility the *pharmakon* is the *same* precisely because it has no identity. And the same (is) as supplement. Or in difference," (*Dissemination* 169). For Derrida, the supplement or difference is the obverse of the term itself, and so terms such as degeneracy, nihilism, and noble can mean their exact opposite under different examinations. Nietzsche too recognized this irony—and in so doing, suggested: "It is a piece of self-deception on the part of philosophers and moralists to suppose that they can extricate themselves from degeneration by merely waging war upon it" (*Twilight* 15). Whereas for Nietzsche, a term can suggest a multiplicity of meanings based on one's perspective or type, Derrida seems to embrace a term's primary meaning and its opposing meaning. For Deleuze the multiplicity of a term's meaning is based on a process of movement, or rhythm. In Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche's nihilism, for example, the philosophers and moralists are not going far enough: they must push beyond the term itself into its opposition: The only way to escape decadence is, ironically, to affirm it, to reevaluate it—to become decadent ourselves.

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche does just that by defining the contradictory, duplicitous elements of degeneration he embodies: "Looking from the perspective of the sick towards *healthier* concepts and values, and conversely looking down from the fullness and self-assuredness of *rich* life into the secret workings of the *decadence* instinct—this is what I practiced longest, this was my true experience; if I became master of anything then it was of this" (8). Nietzsche goes on, after describing how he is decadent, to describe how he's not: he seeks pleasure only to the point of its being conducive, distinguishes his own type from others, and easily lets go of what he does not like; he forgets (9). Healthy and sick, decadent and affirmative—to assess how ironical Nietzsche is being here can perhaps best be interpreted through his tone: that this passage comes so early in his parodic autobiography, in the chapter "Why I Am So Wise," indicates that there is truth in it, even if it is a truth that cannot be pinned down. His movement from one pole to the other embodies the active destruction previously defined; it is a way of not giving into nihilism or fascism, but a method of self-parody, self-overcoming or self-mastery, so similar to that value of self-knowledge—also grounded in flux and change—which Socrates held dear.

Irony in Phaedrus

Perhaps nowhere are Socrates' attempts at self-mastery or self-knowledge better seen than in the opening pages of *Phaedrus*. Here, it seems Socrates and Phaedrus are vying to out-dissemble each other, and through their art of dissembling, they can better reach a semblance of truth. As soon as the stakes of their meeting are conveyed—namely, that Phaedrus has heard a speech from Lysias about seducing a good-looking boy by someone not in love with the boy, Socrates is interested in hearing it too—both begin to play parts, using the logic of Lysias' speech and applying it to themselves. Socrates suggests that if such a way of thinking were applied to other speeches so that those traits typically

associated with the common and the base are appealed to, then everybody would be better off, "Then his speeches would really be sociable, and would serve the common good, (227d)." Here, Socrates is clearly part of Nietzsche's "rabble," one of the common people, or so he wants to seem. On the other hand, if Socrates is dissembling, he's only *playing the part* of the rabble, secretly believing he's not like others, and making us wonder whether society *would* be better off if the weaker traits were appealed to. In such a reading, Socrates would view Lysias as decadent, and so to get what he wants from Phaedrus, he has to pretend that he is decadent too. This ironical reading is supported if we consider that farther along in the dialogue, Socrates rebuts Lysias' speech with his own, and differentiates himself from others through his attempt at knowing, or mastering himself.⁵

"Everything in him is exaggerated, buffo, caricature..." Nietzsche writes (*Twilight* 11), and in the next line this seems so: Socrates is so keen to hear Lysias' speech that he's willing to walk the twenty miles from Athens to Megara and then back. Forty miles seems a bit far to walk for one speech. Phaedrus thinks so; he replies, "My dear Socrates, what do you mean?" The "Dear Socrates" indicates that Phaedrus could be dissembling for Socrates—doesn't he *know* what Socrates means?—that Socrates *loves* speeches? Phaedrus goes on, feigning humility, showering Lysias with praise, equating the value of an ability to remember speeches with that of a pile of gold. We are now so deep in dissembling, with Phaedrus waxing poetic about how he doesn't know the speech, that for Socrates to one-up him, he proceeds to tell a story about Phaedrus in the third person as if he didn't know him—"I tell you Phaedrus, if I don't know Phaedrus, I'm a stranger to myself too" (228a). Under this pretext of false self-knowledge, the weight of self-consciousness here is nearly enough to collapse the whole edifice of dissembling: Socrates repeats Phaedrus' name as if to emphasize how well he knows him, alluding as well to the oracle's advice (also setting the stage to undercut himself later); the story he then narrates describes how Phaedrus learned the speech, set out for a walk and met someone "sick with passion for hearing speeches" (228b-c), which continues up to their present moment, where the speech-lover asks him to repeat the speech and Phaedrus coyly pretends not to want to; finally, Socrates concludes by asking Phaedrus to ask Phaedrus what he's going to do. The doubling here only adds to the self-consciousness and irony of this preparatory scene.

Phaedrus, caught out, admits what is "certainly true," that Socrates won't let Phaedrus get away from him without at least trying to remember what he can of the speech, which Socrates accedes is "quite right," before Phaedrus goes on to admit that while he didn't learn the speech by heart, he can go through and summarize a few of the points. But Socrates, in his coup de grâce, points to what is sticking out from Phaedrus' cloak, the *actual* speech, the *logos*, the oft-noted phallic joke embedded in the text. "Enough!" (228c-e) Phaedrus cries as he produces the speech. Did Socrates only just recognize the speech poking out of Phaedrus' cloak or did he know it was there the entire time, so that his dissembling functions as a playful, if circuitous way of getting what he wants? Phaedrus then defers to Socrates in asking where *he* wants to sit and read the speech, and the two walk toward the river and the plane tree where the rest of the dialogue unfolds. Here, dissembling is a way of showing what *is* not but what *could* be—intentions, desires, realities remain hidden, until negation and the oscillatory effect of probing with questions and statements about claiming, remembering, knowing, and asking, bring us to "actual fact" (228d). Socrates' desire is the active one here in that it wins out—Phaedrus' hopes of using Socrates as a training-ground are dashed by Socrates' dialectic and his irony.

Critics and philosophers such as Gregory Vlastos, Norman Knox and C.L. Griswold have worked to differentiate and delimit the certain kinds of irony apparent in Socratic dialogues, such as in the above scene. Gregory Vlastos has called such moments examples of "complex irony," which is meant to "have the effect of evoking and assisting their own effort at moral self-improvement" (32), where "they" are Socrates' interlocutors. Suspicions of Socrates' meaning may lead "them" to accuse him of mockery, though if Socrates is being mocking, it is unintentional until new evidence causes his interlocutors or us as readers to reevaluate his meaning. Griswold, on the other hand, while defining the dominant theme of this dialogue as self-knowledge, focuses on the irony of Plato as author writing a dialogue about the suspect nature of writing, calling this "Platonic irony" (13). A text that critiques the nature of texts throws into question the nature of writing itself. Part of what enfeebles writing is its immutability, its inability to respond dialectically. When Socrates compares painting and writing based on their silence,

⁵ Cf. 229e: "If anyone has doubts about these creatures and wants to use a rough-and-ready ingenuity to force each of them to conform with probability, he'll need a lot of spare time. As for me, I never have time to spend on these things, and there's a good reason: I still am incapable of obeying the Delphic inscription of knowing myself. It strikes me as absurd to look into matters that have nothing to do with me so long as I am still ignorant in this respect, so I ignore all these matters and go along with the traditional views about them." This reliance on tradition in the face of an inability to question the world outside oneself seems noble, in the Nietzschean sense.

he says, "...you might think they were speaking as if they had some intelligence but if you want an explanation of any of the things they're saying, and if you ask them about it, they just go on and on forever giving the same single piece of information" (275d). A few lines later, when discussing whether the written word has a "legitimate brother," Socrates says, "It is the kind written along with knowledge in the soul of a student. It is capable of defending itself, and it knows how to speak to those it should and keep silent in the company of those to whom it shouldn't speak" (276a). In this sense, only the student with knowledge *in their soul* can use words legitimately, and such knowledge would allow that student to interpret writing appropriately. Platonic irony tests students and weeds out those without the proper writing on their souls by questioning the medium of writing itself. For those who have that knowledge in their souls, the pleasure of a text lies in its interpretation, as long as it is beyond pure nihilism. As Griswold writes, "Part of the ironist's teaching may consist in the thesis that the irony itself, and so the different levels of meaning and the relationship between them, is inseparable from the teaching in question" (13). In this way, the ironic mode is similar to what we see in *Ecce Homo*: an irony that as a style oscillates between sincerity and dissembling so fluidly that the difficulty of negotiating them is exactly what makes texts such as *Phaedrus* a pleasure to read and re-read.

In "The Concept of Irony," Paul de Man elucidates the power of this mood. He recognizes that irony has traditionally been treated as a dialectic of the self, and that he himself has treated it in this way—yet it is exactly this treatment he sets out to question. He moves through Fichte's dialectic of the self in order to describe Frederick Schlegel's passages on irony, invoking "the lofty urbanity of the Socratic muse," as representative of "...the divine breath of irony. In such poems there lives a real *transcendental buffoonery*. Their interior is permeated *by the mood...*" (177) [italics mine]. This is the mood we have seen, an irony of permanent parabasis, where "...at all points the narrative can be interrupted" (179)—that is, revalued, reassessed, or re-interpreted. The nature of irony—that it can mean the opposite as well as any number of approximations of what might be intended—encourages interpretation, which is one way to read Nietzsche's unanswered questions in "The Problem of Socrates," and his broader project, as an alternative to dialectic.⁶ And while irony necessitates reason through its potentially being taken at face value—a healthy skepticism can help a reader avoid falling into absurdity—only through interpretation and subjecting language to an inspection of its transparency or obfuscatory power can we come closer to the essence or truth of its meaning. Even so, meaning can be undone later; while other philosophers of irony define the concept in its negative sense—in its attempts to move toward an absolute—a more *affirmative* interpretation revels in irony's heterogeneous, multiple revaluations of meaning, and the settling of a singular meaning only upon a text's completed reading. Such affirmative interpretations arguably begin in an "active destruction" of a text's meaning, in a desire to overcome one set meaning with another. That is, coming to *Phaedrus* or any Platonic dialogue with a negative conception of irony limits interpretations of the multiple ironies at play, and thereby limits the potential for interpretations of the text. A negative conception of irony also prevents readers from seeing the meta-irony of textual revaluation: that it functions in the same manner as personal revaluation, that is, as *inherent uncertainty* about meaning because meaning can always change after what comes next, that our self-knowledge is always in flux simply by the nature of our *becoming*. For example: once Phaedrus reads Socrates Lysias' speech, Phaedrus asks him whether it was not extraordinary. Socrates replies:

Yes, it was out of this world, my friend. I was amazed. And you were the reason I felt this way, Phaedrus, because I was looking at you while you were reading, and it seemed to me that the speech made you glow with pleasure. Assuming that your understanding of these matters is better than mine, I followed your lead, and so I came to share the ecstasy of your enthusiasm.

Phaedrus: Hmm...does it strike you as something to joke about like this?

Socrates: Do you think I'm joking? Do you think I'm anything less than serious? (234d)

As we read, we might suspect as Phaedrus does that Socrates is not being sincere. And in a way we're right—on the next page Socrates critiques the speech's content and its repetitions—but for now, Socrates *is* being genuine, he's not being anything less than serious, especially if we follow his reasoning. He really does think the speech was excellent, but mostly because he's watching Phaedrus enjoy it, which must prove its excellence, in a way, at least. Socrates can be inspired like Phaedrus, not necessarily by the speech written by Lysias, but by Phaedrus himself. This notion of inspiration relates

⁶ "Nietzsche creates his own method: dramatic, typological and differential. He turns philosophy into an art, the art of interpreting and evaluating" (Deleuze 196). Cf. Derrida on Nietzsche, "Nietzsche never writes that x is exclusively good or bad. Each entity is submitted to interpretation, this interpretation is an evaluation of what is active or reactive (*Negotiations* 245).

to how Socrates can disagree with the content of the speech, unsure which "skillful men and women of old" (235c) would disallow him to agree with Phaedrus that it is in fact good content. Even though he can't remember how he was made aware of this, his awareness of his own ignorance leads him to become conscious that he has been filled, "like a jug by streams flowing from elsewhere..." (235d). This is not the only water imagery used in comparison to knowledge (or meaning or inspiration) in this dialogue—and the meaning is clear: knowledge, meaning or inspiration can flow in and out of one as if the individual were a vessel.

The irony flows on: Socrates tries to penetrate Phaedrus' meaning about whether his "likeness in beaten metal will be erected next to the offering of the Cypselids in Olympia" (236b), this the second mention of a statue Phaedrus intends to dedicate to Socrates if he can add to the speech. Phaedrus then accuses him, "...you have laid yourself open to the same maneuver you applied to me. You absolutely must deliver the best speech you can, so that we aren't forced to trade words in the vulgar fashion of a comedy. Be careful: I'm sure you don't want me to tell you things like, 'I tell you Socrates, if I don't know Socrates...'" (236c)". Phaedrus' self-consciousness here verges on the comic, as he himself asserts; what he is describing is both what he believes *ought* to be done and what *is* being done and concludes with an imperative to hearken to what he says. But not until Phaedrus threatens Socrates with saying exactly what will make him give the speech does he win. Socrates begs, "Then don't say it!" (236d) but Phaedrus will, even if he's not sure which gods to invoke—itsself a comic moment—why not; the plane tree that is our current setting should be good enough: "Do you mind...?" Phaedrus asks. He goes on to swear that if Socrates does not give a speech, he, Phaedrus, will give up speechifying for the rest of his life. Socrates would suffer here, too, for he would never hear the beautiful Phaedrus recite any speeches—which as he has noted, gives him great pleasure—though it is Phaedrus who would sacrifice the most. Even though Socrates calls Phaedrus a "foul creature" (237a), a rather comical, exaggerated insult, Socrates is clearly not the kind of person who would impose on his young friend such a punishment, not if he can help it.

And so Socrates' speech is framed rather self-consciously by a cunning man and a beautiful young man (237b). He defines love, and breaks, again self-consciously, to ask Phaedrus if he thinks he's been inspired, before confirming that indeed, he has been: "It's your fault. But listen to the rest of the speech. After all, the fit might be averted, I suppose. But we had better leave this in the hands of the gods, while we resume the speech to the boy" (238d). Socrates seems to oscillate between being impressed at his own eloquence, wanting to continue, and wondering if he should or will stop before he gives himself over to the gods. There is a sense here that Socrates is self-consciously losing himself in his speech, aided by the divine power of the plane tree, the Nymphs, or another god. Before he continues to meld with nature through his speech, this self-conscious break functions ironically, as if he were working to overcome himself, with both Phaedrus and the gods aiding him. Here, Socrates is self-denying without being nihilistic—Socrates actively proceeds with his speech without necessarily wanting to, as if he senses that the results may not be entirely good.

By the time he's finished his speech in defense of the non-lover, and "was about to cross the river" (242b), Socrates recognizes his "familiar divine sign" (242c), which suggests he purify himself. Here, the gods are again associated with the power of water, and Socrates' internal voice leads him to conclude that his speech was "awful and almost irreligious" (242d), that Phaedrus "bewitched" him into being his mouthpiece, and that he has offended Love. Thus the stage is set for the Palinode. But before he begins, Socrates asks: "Where's that boy I was talking to before? I want him to hear the speech too before rushing off to gratify a non-lover..." This is arguably the closest to a profession of love for Phaedrus that we have seen yet from Socrates. By now we can re-interpret Socrates' previous speech and his admiration of Lysias' as a product of his love for Phaedrus, both instances of giving in to appearance over essence. Socrates has been filled up by Love, but it seems now he is ready to take on the full responsibility for his palinode as indicated by his desire to leave his head uncovered (243b). That is, until he clarifies, and says the previous speech he gave *was Phaedrus'* and that the palinode he is about to give is *Stesichorus'*, further absolving himself from potential censure (244a). Thus, following the palinode, the rest of the dialogue is a way for Socrates to further approximate himself, and come closer to understanding exactly what is at stake and what he means by speaking well and properly.

Our evaluation of Socrates' meaning cannot be complete, then, until we have finished reading the dialogue in its entirety. As the dialogue's subject comes to revolve around what makes a good speech, it's clear that Socratic self-knowledge is turned not just upon Socrates himself or upon Phaedrus in its various shades of gray, but ultimately *on the reader* to know themselves as interpreters of what Socrates is saying. The critic Matthew Linck points this out by noting that irony functions in *Phaedrus* retrospectively, but that, "We cannot allow the retrospective reading to cancel out the prospective

reading" (267). This notion justifies how to read Socrates as a "dissembler" without finding ourselves stuck in negativity.

Irony, or dissembling, is one way Socrates gives himself over completely to the immediate present, and it does not preclude doubling back on itself. In many ways, such being is instinctive, and given to self-overcoming. As Martin Heidegger puts it: "...metaphysics' utmost entanglement in the inauthenticity of nihilism comes to language in the desire to overcome" (231). Irony, while on one hand the trope of language's utmost negation, can also be the trope of language's self-overcoming, the point where "...the entanglement closes itself off from its own essence and thus, under the guise of an overcoming of nihilism, transposes nihilism into the effectuality of its deracinated nonessence" (231). Socrates' irony uses nihilism as a negation, but a negation of what is not. This is how we can read Socrates sincerely, moment by moment, as representing a nihilism that degenerates into affirming what is. Socratic irony necessitates sincerity at its every stage, and in this way becomes affirmative because Socrates is never entirely sure what he professes to be sure about, or if he is, he can always undo that surety on the next page. While his dialectic is meant to reach a conclusion which can be upheld as truth, those conclusions Socrates reaches with his interlocutors indicate a way of reasoning which can lead one to conclude a truth that stands only in a particular moment, subject to later reevaluation. To read Socrates as working to know and discover or uncover himself is also to read him as one who is always becoming.

Irony as *Ricorso*

If irony is a tool to better understand the dialectic of the self and to self-overcome, it should work similarly on the cultural level, from self-conscious reflection—active destruction and the beginnings of decadence—into difference and the beginnings of regeneration. Within notions of culture, degeneration and *paideia*, it makes sense that the only way Greek culture could have regenerated is through an Other, and that Socrates, with his innovations of dialectic and irony, initiates this phase—is indeed a sort of Other for the Athenians of his time. To consider Socrates' irony as representative of the very beginnings of a *ricorso*, rather than the depths of ironic barbarism Vico associates with the early medieval age, still divided between a pagan and Christian paradigm (White, *Tropics* 214), is possible when we view him as a critical point in Greek civilization, as its apex and the beginning of its descent. Vico writes: "Socrates originates moral philosophy. Plato flourishes in metaphysics. Athens is resplendent with all the arts of the most cultivated humanity" (47). But within two generations, Athenian supremacy will be undermined and its culture will change drastically, in part through its spread by Alexander's movement east. Regarding the Persians, Vico writes: "Even Aristotle...writes that before that time the Greeks had but told fables about them...In this way the Greeks began to have some real knowledge about the affairs of other peoples" (47). Concrete knowledge of the Other furthers ironic self-reflection by allowing for the reevaluation and incorporation of elements of that Otherness. In this way, the incorporation of Other values leads from the decadence of the primary culture to its regeneration defined by mutated or adapted noble values. Thus, cultural irony signifies a dialectically generative form of decadence—the movement beyond what is known into a new version of culture.

Irony signals the *ricorso*, the end of the progression that begins in metaphor, fables and myth, and which progresses through the solidification of language in metonymy and synecdoche, and decays in reflection and self-consciousness. As Vico defined it, irony is "...fashioned of falsehood by dint of a reflection which wears the mask of truth" (131). This convolution is twice removed from truth itself: a reflection wearing the mask of truth, an instability of meaning that never quite reaches truth—yet which pretends to. Metaphor, on the other hand, though still with a core of self-consciousness, since anthropomorphic subjectivity is its governing principle, is not self-consciously *reflective*, but uses the self as a basis of comparison with an Other. If irony is the simulacrum, a double removal from an ideal, metaphor is a turning away from the cave wall: a single removal from the model. Metaphor begins, then, as soon as the primary culture recognizes the Other—and continues as the primary culture actively destroys itself by incorporating Otherness in order to regenerate. The irony that leads to self-overcoming or self-parody as exemplified by Socrates and Nietzsche can also be defined as the beginning of metaphor: a comparison of what one *was* with what one *is*. C.L. Griswold recognizes that "A myth, unlike a syllogism, has the capacity to act as a complex mirror in which people can recognize not just who they are but who they might become at their best" (147). And interestingly, the prevalence of metaphor increases toward the end of *Phaedrus*. The palinode's myth of the soul; the myth of Theuth and Thamous to explain to Phaedrus the dangers of writing, and how it can lead to "a spurious appearance of intelligence" (275a); those original prophecies spoken by an oak which Socrates combines with an ironic condemnation of "you young ones," (275b)—which includes Phaedrus, who is more interested in appearances than truth—to his anthropomorphism of writing, which he allegorizes with the metaphor of a farmer sowing; to his recapitulation of the lessons of the dialogue and his final prayer, itself suggestive

of the first stage of the Viconian *corso*, the age of gods. All of these metaphors attempt to undermine appearance for the sake of essence.

In a world succumbing to base instincts, irony can be the beginning point for dialectic, as well as for generative self-overcoming, on both cultural and individual terms. Whether these types of self-consciousness may or may not indicate what we mean when we describe the Western Tradition, it's clear that thanks to Socrates they remain deeply influential today, despite Nietzsche's attempts to proliferate multiplicity and interpretation as an alternative to dialectic. Yet Nietzsche's interpretation and Socrates' dialectical irony are not incompatible: For Nietzsche, both determine existence: the knowledge drive, as represented by Socrates' rational legacy, and the metaphorical, creative drive as represented by his own taste for multiple interpretations (McCarthy 245). The former leads to the destruction of illusions and the latter generates them, creating a cycle that is necessary for humanity: "The world of consciously formed illusion is the world of happiness" (246). If the knowledge drive is a product of dialectic and the creative drive a product of irony, to lose the former is to dwell purely in instinct, characteristic of the archaic age preceding Socrates; whereas to lose the metaphorical, creative capacity is to lose value in one's life, to stop creating and give in fully to decadence and nihilism in their negative sense, without ever going far enough to turn them into affirmation and regeneration. There is overlap too; the one yields to the other, and the cycle begins again.

While I have focused largely on Nietzsche's point of view of Socrates from his late career, it's clear that from his earlier texts Socrates is not Nietzsche's enemy, or that even if he is, Nietzsche rejoices in having such a strong opponent. In *Human, All Too Human*, written ten years before *Twilight of the Idols*, he writes: "Socrates excels the founder of Christianity in being able to be serious cheerfully and in possessing that *wisdom full of roguishness* that constitutes the finest state of the human soul. And he also possessed the finer intellect" (332). Even in *Beyond Good and Evil*, published two years before "The Problem of Socrates," Nietzsche suggests that, "...among men of fatigued instincts, among the conservatives of ancient Athens who let themselves go—toward happiness... irony may have been required for greatness of soul" (138). Irony is what unites these two thinkers, although that may often be overshadowed by how their other modes of thought differ—dialectic requires an interlocutor, and interpretation does not. This fundamental difference plays itself out through their respectively ironic deaths—to use Frye's terminology, whereas the former's is high mimetic—Socrates the hero—the latter's is low mimetic—Nietzsche, poor Nietzsche.

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