

This Beast is Complex: Imposture and Plato's *Sophist*

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Like one beginning to rouse himself from a dose of chloroform treacherously given, he half divines, too, that he, the philosopher, had unwittingly been betrayed into being an unphilosophical dupe. To what vicissitudes of light and shade is man subject! (Melville 1971, p. 112)

There are posers and there are imposters. The imposter is more insidious, more dangerous, than what we colloquially term a poser. Whereas the poser apes the manner, style, or presence of something, he nonetheless desires to be the thing that he can only appear to be. The poser's lack of *technē* ("know-how," "skill," "art") makes his identification and expulsion integral to the technician's on-going refinement and purification of their knowledge, of their craft. Although the poser's pose is merely an appearance, his confusion of the thing itself with the signs of its presence makes him vulnerable. The poser's vulnerability lies in his desire to be *something*. Far from a threat, the poser's identity constantly attests to its deficiency, the inconsistency of its presence, which exposes a lack that serves to reinforce the possessor of knowledge, who is, in turn, tasked with either emendating or castigating the poser's pose, sifting the difference between pose and posture. The radicality of imposture, on the contrary, concerns the danger of one who knows that she does not desire what the other has or possesses, does not desire the

other's knowledge. Far more pernicious, the imposter cannot be corrected, since her truth lies in upsetting the measure by which one determines the difference between the correct and false. Her truth is otherwise than correct. If the *poseur* is one who desires to belong, the imposter belongs without belonging, an outsider inside. The imposter, to borrow Heidegger's apt formula for the sophist, is "the walking incarnation of μή ὄν [*mē on*: non-being]" (Heidegger 1997, p. 279).

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Plato's *Sophist* is perhaps the first treatise on imposture, the sophist the paradigmatic figure of the imposter. The sophist cannot simply be reduced to the dialectic between pose and posture, which is nevertheless how Plato often seeks to position him. The sophist's ridiculous character (*katagēlastos*), according to Plato, consists not merely in the fact that he presumes to know what he in fact does not, but that he poses as an educator who sells what he does not *in truth* possess. As Socrates puts it in the *Protagoras*, "the sophist is a kind of merchant [emporos] or huckster [kapēlos] of wares by which the soul is fed" who peddles "knowledge to whomever desires it" and who praises "everything they sell" regardless of whether it is "good or bad for the soul" (Plato 1977, 313c–e; quoted in Hénaff 2010, p. 41). The "money-making kind [khrēmatistikòn génos]" seems to be his most salient feature. As a "merchant of knowledge," to cite Marcel Hénaff, if the sophist sells something which he in fact knows little about, if he does not truly possess "knowledge of wise things [sophōn epistēmōna]," if he does not know what virtue (*aretē*) is, then his claim to educate the human being (*paidein anthrōpous*) in such matters is fraudulent: "if there is a payment but no transmission of *aretē*, then the Sophist really is a faker and an illusionist, or even worse, a cheat" (Hénaff 2010, p. 40). The claim is not simply that the sophist does not know that he does not know (in contradistinction to Socrates's knowledge of his own ignorance) but that he *knowingly* deceives.

The sophist may not know what he nonetheless claims to teach, but he may in fact know that he does not know, making him Socrates's villainous double. "And so is a wolf like a dog—the wildest lie the tamest" (Plato 1996, 231a).

Sophistry would then not be the activity of a "mindless soul," a form of "mental derangement [paraphrosynē]" due to ignorance (ibid., 228d). It would be a "sickness of soul" closer to "villainy [ponēria]." Sophistical practice would then imply a certain knowledge of deceit, of trickery (*apatē*). And its practice would entail a knowledge of falsity (*pseudos*). Sophistry would be the inheritor of *mētis*, a form of cunning intelligence.¹ Sophists would be teachers of this dark art. They would be experts precisely in the art of corrupting the soul of those they taught, youth and elderly alike. If such is the case, the sophist is not one who falls prey to contradiction, who gets "tripped up in thought" by having an "opinion that one know something while not really knowing it" (ibid., 229c), but one who apprehends and mobilizes it albeit for nefarious purposes, for making the weaker argument triumph over the stronger, for callous cash payment.² The sophist argues fallaciously, which is not only to say that he says something false, but that he does so in order to deceive.³ If such is the case, then the sophist's pose becomes imposture.

A fraud, a sham, *ein Hochstapler*, or what Herman Melville terms a "confidence-man": an imposter is not merely one who

¹ Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant position the sophist as a kind of meeting point between "traditional *mētis*" and "the new intelligence of the philosophers" (Detienne and Vernant 1978, p. 4).

² Commenting on this character of sophistry, Marcel Detienne notes, "This is a level of thought that comprehends contradiction, even though the principle of contradiction was not actually formulated until Aristotle produced his theory of contradiction and drew the logical conclusions from it." (Detienne 1999, p. 203, n. 63)

³ "But starting with Plato and then with Aristotle, sophistical thought would be devoted to sophistry, in the sense of fallacious reasoning, in other words, reasoning that is not only false but also intentionally deceptive." (Cassin 2014, p. 1007)

appears to be something one is not (a poser), but one who appears not to be something without the other's deceit. Deceit is the sophist's *ousia*, "beinghood." Yet, this requires trust: the kind of trust that Odysseus capitalizes on when he tells Polyphemus, the Cyclops, that his name is *Outis*, "no-one";⁴ and the kind of trust guaranteed by *Zeus xénios*, i.e., Zeus, the patron god of strangers.⁵ The confidence-man is defined not by the "con," which names the dupe, i.e., the one conned, but by the act by which the con's *confidence* is traded upon. And even a man-eater has his vulnerabilities. Polyphemus trusts in the name, in the fact that the name names something, and it is this very fact that Odysseus turns to his advantage. The imposter's imposture trades upon the pose of the poser, capitalizing on the latter's desire to be (something), not in order to expose the difference between the appearance and what the appearance is an appearance of, but in order to capitalize on that lack of being.⁶ Otherwise than being, not a one, the sophist is what the Stranger from Elea, in Plato's *Sophist*, terms an imitator, a *mimētēs*, which Jakob Klein for instance, on at least one occasion, translates as imposter (Klein 1977, p. 30).

⁴ Odysseus's cunning consists in playing on the *logos* as *légein tí*, so that when Polyphemus is asked, "Is someone [mē tis] killing you by ruse or by force," he responds, "My friends, no one is killing me [Outis me kteinei]." As Pietro Pucci points out, the passage plays on two forms in which the negative is formed in Greek: *ou* or *ouk*, a factual negation, and *mē*, a prohibitive or subjective negation. Thus, he suggests that *mētis* is a compound of *mē* (negative particle) and *tis*, "someone," which makes Odysseus's "finest plan" a dramatization of *mētis*, that is, "cunning," "intelligence." See Box 1 under the entry "Mētis" in Cassin 2014, p. 658.

⁵ It is thus of central importance that the Socratic figure of the dialogue—a dialogue concerned above all with matters of language and naming, and their referents—remains nameless, a *xénos*, "Stranger," that counts on our trust as to his identity. "*Xenos* means both guest and host, that is, any of two parties bound by ties of hospitality" (see "Glossary" in Plato 1996, p. 86).

⁶ On this score, the comparison between Melville's *The Confidence-Man* and Plato's *Sophist* seems particularly apt, since the former's novel takes particular aim at the "liberal's" desire to appear good, to appear human, more than be good or human.

The word “imposture,” which names the manner, way, or mode of the imposter, derives from the Latin, *imponere*: *im* (“into,” “in,” “on,” “upon”) and *ponere* (“to put” or “to place”). Imposture is “in the place of” and thus is related to position, positing, and imposition. The imposter posits or positions him or herself in the place of the other and the other is thereby placed in the position of his or her absence. The imposter singularly attests to the paradoxical existence of non-being. If we are to attribute being to the sophist, which we do by the force of the *logos*, when saying that he exists, that he *is* of such and such a character, then we risk attributing being to non-being. We threaten being’s *proprietary* relation to itself. The existence of the sophist, of imposture, imposes on the philosopher, on the student of Parmenides, and on thought as such, an inconsistent logic—what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe calls a “law of impropriety”⁷—in which being would appear to exclude itself from being.⁸ It would not belong to itself, attributable to that which it is not. The imposter is both a permanent threat to the *logos*’s inscription in and of being, a threat to the meaning of being, imperiling the assumption that when we speak we are indeed saying something (*légein tì*). As the Eleatic Stranger says, “Whenever there is speech, it’s necessary that it be speech about something [*légein tì*], and impossible for it not to be about anything” (Plato 1996, 262e). This threat becomes the eminent occasion for philosophizing, summoning it to think

⁷ In “Diderot: Paradox and Mimesis,” Lacoue-Labarthe writes: “only the ‘man without qualities,’ the being without properties or specificity, the subjectless subject (absent from himself, distracted from himself, deprived of self) is able to present or produce in general. Plato, in his way, knew this very well: the mimeticians are the worst possible breed because they are no one, pure mask or pure hypocrisy, and as such unassignable, unidentifiable, impossible to place in a determined class or to fix in a function that would be proper to them and would find its place in a just distribution of tasks” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, p. 259).

⁸ See for example formulations such as “then it turns out that Being lacks itself” and “so, according to this account, Being, since it is deprived of itself, will be not-being [*ouk òn*]” (Plato 1996, 245c).

what sense the imposter's non-sensical apparition might have. As Heidegger notes, the Stranger's determination of the *logos* as "speech about something" "sustains the whole discussion," and, yet, "[a]s long as we actually adhere to this structure, we cannot touch the sophist with any argument, and indeed not only because no arguments can be proffered against him but because it is not even possible to begin to speak about him" (Heidegger 1997, p. 293). To begin to speak of him entails that one either says too little, which is to say, nothing at all, or too much, in the effort to track and pin down the proliferation of identities that the hunt itself seems to engender. This makes the sophist a "wondrous object" (Plato 1996, 225e), a truly complex beast.

It is the multiple guises of the "many-headed sophist" (*ibid.*, 240c), the many masks of the imitator, the imposter's lack of a stable identity, that makes this figure so slippery, so difficult to hunt down and so resistant to conceptual determination.⁹ The sophist confronts philosophical thought with an unbounded multiplicity. The very being of the sophist appears to be not one but many. However, the peculiar fact that this manifold bears the name of single expertise, sophistry, signals this being's unsoundness, his villainy: "villainy is sedition and sickness of soul" (*ibid.*, 228b).

⁹ The dialogue is staged as a game between the hunter and the hunted, between a master at evasion (debate) and a master at identification (method of division). The sophist is conceived as a "beast" that disguises its identity, evading capture, through the multiplication of his identity. The Stranger's attempt to pin the sophist down (to adopt his own wrestling metaphor) through the method of division yields a creature with "many-heads." He appears as "a paid hunter of the young and the rich," a "trader" and a "peddler" of "soul-related learnables," a "self-seller of learnables," an expert in polemical argument, and even "a soul-related cleanser of opinions that impede learning" (*ibid.*, 231d–e). Commenting on Theaetetus's exasperation, his being at an impasse, at the sophist appearing to be "so many things," the Stranger states: "Your being at an impasse is likely enough. But then we must consider that he too is by now totally at an impasse about how he'll continue to slip through our account. For the wrestler's proverb is right: 'Not easy to escape all the holds'" (*ibid.*, 231c).

Although the sophist “appears to be a knower of many things,” he “is called by the name of one expertise” (ibid., 232a). Does language here conceal the nature of the sophist or betray its truth? In either case, the sophist is deemed “something unsound” because the very mode of his being betrays his inscription in language. The sophist is uncontained, unmeasured by the name (*ònoma*).

The imposter is an *archē*-villain within the Platonic universe, because imposture is the most sophisticated form of sedition, which the Eleatic Stranger, in the dialogue, defines as “the differing of what is by nature akin, arising from some sort of dissolution” (ibid., 228a). The sophist is essentially divisive, embodying an ugliness of soul, since he incarnates “that everywhere ill-formed kind, ‘lack of measure [amétrios]’” (ibid.). Ill-formed (*duseidēs*), his soul is a grotesque mixture of unnatural, incompatible types, a turbulent motion without end to direct his course or measure to harmonize his being: “opinions with desires, and spiritedness with pleasures, and reason with pains, and all such things with one another” (ibid., 228b). The sophist’s unseemly appearance throws into question the *logos*’s capacity to determine what it in fact names. If *légein* is *légein tì*, then the sophist despite his locuquacity seems to be a “mute obstacle” to speech: not something, but not nothing; something that is not one, which is to say, not a one, and is thus uncountable. Or, at a minimum, a thing that throws off the count. Escaping from the *logos* by means of the *logos*, the sophist embodies the form of that which is ill-formed by pitting the *logos* against itself through debate (*antilégein*). “For it’s apparent to me,” states the Stranger, “that one thing reveals him [menuein] most of all” (ibid., 232b). The sophist is *antilogikos*. And this is Plato’s point of departure: if the sophist’s multiplicity is uncountable, how can sophistry be a *technē*? How can it be an art, a skill, a practice? If the sophist does indeed teach something, as they indeed claim and for which they are paid, then sophistry can be learned, and if it is learnable, a *mathēma*, it must be *accountable*. Plato thus approaches sophistry as *sophistikē* (the art of

sophistication: a *technē* of professing wisdom or appearing to be wise). One thus has to come to know what art it is that the sophist practices. By determining this “object,” fish-like in its slipperiness, it can be pinned down, hooked and thereby dragged up from below, from the depth, by the mouth: the instrument of speech.

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What is the art that the sophist practices, the expertise that he deploys and teaches for a price? It is *antilégein*, “debate.” It is the art of embracing the “seam” of language (*lógos*), the very difference between *légein* and *légein tí*.¹⁰ It is the sophist’s character of *antilogikos*, of working in, but against language, that philosophy will seize upon, acting as a purgative that seeks to mend, to reform, to set straight his motley character, to educate the educator by gathering into one his dispersed manifold. This is a tricky business precisely because the Stranger characterizes the sophist’s art of refutation in terms that seem to efface the difference between the sophistic and Socratic *elenchus*, presenting him as one who cleanses rather than corrupts. Like the philosopher, the Stranger suggests, the sophist exposes the contradictions in speech:

They question someone on those topics about which he thinks he’s saying something when in fact he’s saying nothing. Then, inasmuch as the people they question wander in their opinions, they easily inspect them; and bringing those opinions together in the same place through discussion, they put them alongside each other and, by putting them together in this way, display the opinions as contradicting themselves about the same things with respect to the same points in the same ways. (Plato 1996, 230b)

¹⁰ “Well then, he’s got a very marked seam. For one of them is naïve, because he thinks he knows the things that he opines. But the figure of the other—because of his mucking about among arguments—contains much suspicion and fear that he’s ignorant of those things about which he’s presented himself to others in the figure of a knower” (ibid., 268a).

In order to guard against this “similarity,” the Stranger proposes to think the knowledge that such a power to dispute “about all things” implies. If Socratic wisdom is on the side of irony, the *sophistēs*, the professor of wisdom, is on the side of the joke (*paidiàn*), the laughable (*gélastos*) and the ridiculous or the absurd (*katagélastos*). “Don’t we have to regard it as a joke [*paidiàn*],” the Stranger asks Theaetetus, “when someone says that he knows everything and would teach it to another for a little money and in a little time?” (Ibid., 234a) The statement itself is a fine example of irony, since if the sophists truly knew everything then they would indeed be utter fools to sell it so cheap. Such irony recalls the rhetorician Isocrates’s claim for who the sophists, however, were less fools than hypocrites who render themselves “ridiculous” since “they distrust those from whom they are to get this small profit—those to whom they intend to impart their sense of justice—and they deposit the fees from their students with men whom they have never taught” (Isocrates 2000, pp. 4–5; quoted in Hénaff 2010, p. 37). If the sophist is not a fool, then the emphasis shifts from the truly ridiculous claim to “know all things” to the sophist’s self-presentation, his ability to *play* at being wise. The Greek word *paidiàn*, translated by Brann, et al. as “joke,” could also be translated as “game,” and moreover as a “children’s game [...], an activity lacking accountability” (Hénaff 2010, p. 48). Even if the sophist knows that he is not wise, he acts as if he is. It is a form of “make-believe.”

It is the sophist’s character as a *mimētēs* that is thus at issue. The character of the *mimētēs* is to pretend to know what he does not, because he has knowledge of pretension. He knows how to seem wise without being wise. The imitator is an “enchanter [*goēta*],” a joker, a jester, a juggler (*goēs*), who bids “farewell to the truth” in an effort to produce a semblance. Like a magician, the sophist makes something appear more, even though it is less, true. He is thus a “wonder-worker [*thaumatopoiōn*]” (Plato 1996, 235b). Preferring to juggle words for the effects they produce

rather than pin them down, the sophist does not take the *logos* in earnest (*spoudē*). “He only handles words,” in the words of Hénaff, “as a mere game (*padein*), without caring about truth, which is to say about being, the weight of which is borne by words” (Hénaff 2010, p. 49).

The knowledge that the sophist has is not knowledge of truth but *doxistikē*, “opinion producing knowledge” (Plato 1996, 233c). The sophist excels in producing opinions about all things and these “enchant” only to the extent that they seem to be. The sophist is a *mimētēs*, according to the Stranger, because he is an “enchanter [goēta],” but he enchants because he is “an imitator of the things that *are*” (ibid., 235a). The art of *antilégein* is not only an art of “separating” opinions, of “refutation,” the Stranger claims; it is an art similar to an art that knows how “to make and do [poieîn kai drān] all things” (ibid., 233d). Such an art is likewise conceived as a joke: “do you know a more artful or delightful form of joke [ēidos è tò paidiās] than the imitative one [mimētikón]?” (Ibid., 234b) The imitator is thus conceived as one who “plays jokes [paidiās metekhóntōn]” (ibid., 235a).

Plato’s interest in the imitator returns the question of *mimēsis* to its roots in mime (*mîmos*). In the *Memorabilia*, Xenophon already extends the following set of terms—*mîmos* (“mime” as both genre and actor), *mîmeisthai* (“to mimic”), *mimēma* (product of the action of mimicking), and *mimētēs* (the one who mimics)—to the activities of painting and sculpting. He thus applies a notion which initially refers primarily to mime, but also dance and music, “activities aimed at expressing an inner reality,”¹¹ at what Jean-Pierre Vernant terms the “presentification” of the

¹¹ I am here citing Jacqueline Lichtenstein’s and Elisabeth Decultot’s entry on “Mimesis” in Cassin 2014, p. 659.

invisible,¹² to designate the rendering of an external reality. Yet, as Vernant stresses, Xenophon's treatment of *mimeisthai* does not pose the problem of *mimēsis* as a problem of the resemblance between a model (*paradigma*) and image (*eidōlon*). Rather, it involves a triadic structure. Painting and sculpture are like the mime's practice insofar as they perform or testify to a presence (that which is mimicked) addressed to a spectator called upon to verify this presence. In this structure, the spectator is privileged and *mimeisthai* is conceived as "a performance, a demonstration" rather than a representation.

Plato widens the sense of the term *mimeisthai* to involve "all figurative or representational activities," but he also restricts the sense of *mimeisthai*, according to Vernant, to the dyad of imitation and the imitated, the copy and the model, foregrounding the problem of their relation and thus crucially of their difference. From the triadic to the dyadic, a shift in "accent" occurs. Vernant writes,

By privileging the relationship of mimic-spectator, the vocabulary of *mimeisthai*, as used in the fifth century, operates between two poles. In the first place, there is deception: in the mimic—and through him—the spectator perceives not the person in question as he really is, but the one the mimic is trying to copy. A second factor is identification: *mimēsis* implies that, by adopting the other's ways, the simulator becomes just like the one he is intending to mimic. In Plato, except where *mimeisthai* is used in an ordinary sense,

¹² Vernant writes, "At the pivotal point of the fifth and fourth centuries, the theory of *mimēsis*, sketched out by Xenophon, and elaborated in a fully systematic way by Plato, marks the moment when in Greek culture the turn is completed that leads from the 'presentification,' the making present, of the invisible to the imitation of appearance. It is at this time that the category of figural representation emerges in its specific features and, at the same time, becomes attached to *mimēsis*—the great human fact of imitation, which gives it a solid foundation." (Vernant 1991, p. 152) This has the effect of separating the problem of the image from the religious, since it attaches it to the question of "art," in the sense of *technē*.

the accent, on the contrary, is emphatically put on the relationship between the image and the thing of which it is the image, on the relationship of resemblance that joins and yet distinguishes the two. This explicit formulation of the bond of “semblance” that every kind of imitation must activate brings to the fore the problem of the copy and the model and what they are, as much in themselves as in relation to one another. The question then overtly posed is that of the nature of “resembling,” of the essence of “semblance.” (Vernant 1991, p. 166)

In the *Sophist*, Plato effectively moves between these two determinations of *mimēsis*. The imitator is precisely a figure who occupies the space between the dyadic and triadic structure. The sophist introduces into his discourse a relation, which positions the thing in itself (being) in relation to its difference from itself, to the way that it seems, approaching what is said in terms of its effect upon a subject which is absent. His discourse addresses itself to an absent third whose absence it presents: an addressee that I have referred to elsewhere as the “absentee subject” (see Kukuljevic 2017).

Antilégein engages in the art of making (*poiesis*) a spoken image of something which is absent. An image (*eídōlon*) is twofold; it is a likeness (*eikōn*) or an apparition (*phántasma*). To make an image is to make something that is “not”: not the thing that appears or seems to be but its likeness or its apparition. The “not” is thus not itself univocal, but divided depending on its place: whether it relates to a presence that is absent (as in the case of a likeness) or whether it absents a presence, assuming the absent place of the thing itself (an apparition). The image is thus a form of non-being, which would make the image-making art (*mimetikē*) a kind of knowledge of non-being. Whereas likenesses derive their being from the beings they are like, apparitions are truly problematic, since they force the speaker to attribute being not only to a likeness but that which lacks being, that which is not a likeness. It is a compound negativity. The sophist’s *anti-légein* is a *poiesis*, since

it makes something that is not, an *eidōlon*. If speaking is a matter of making images in words, it is crucially important to know if one makes a likeness or an apparition. If the latter, then one makes “something” that runs counter to the *logos* as *légein tí* (speech about something), for one can only speak about an apparition in term of what it lacks; it is not like but dislike. *Antilégein* produces *phántasma* by positioning something in the place of its absence.

To think the sophist, the *mimētēs*, the imposter, is to think the place of what he makes: the place of absence (non-being). As the practitioner of the apparition-making art, the imposter does not make a likeness, but an image that internalizes a relation to an absence and presents that absence as present. “What do we call,” the Stranger asks, “that which appears to be like the beautiful only because it is seen from an un-beautiful point of view, but which, if someone were empowered to see things that large adequately, wouldn’t even seem to be like what it claims to be like? Since it appears but is not like, shouldn’t we call it an apparition (*phántasma*)?” (Plato 1996, 236b) The apparition is not an image that presents something it is not, invoking an absent presence, which it is like; rather the apparition is not like the thing it presents, since it is made to appear in the very place of its absence. And the Stranger says precisely: it is not-beautiful, because it is positioned in relation to the ugly, an “un-beautiful point of view.” It is out of place. The apparition is not-beautiful because it presents its displacement of place.

The imposter would thus be one who makes of himself an apparition: “when the very maker of the apparition furnishes himself as the instrument [...], when someone uses his own body to make it appear to resemble your figure, or to make his voice like your voice—this part of the apparition making art [*phantastikḗs*] has especially been called, I suppose, ‘imitating’ [*mímēsis*]” (ibid., 267a). The imposter makes the place of the other appear. And he does so by making his own presence absent. Imposture would be a certain knowledge of the void of place, knowing that who one

is is not “one,” not something, but the absent place of the other. The imposter could know that she is, but not who or what she is: inhabiting the difference between her absent place and the form that occupies it. The imposter must know not-being by grasping the place of her absence.

The claim to know nothing (*mēden*), and worse, to be a know-nothing, sounds utterly ridiculous. Yet, the sophist is not an idiot even if he plays dumb at times. The Stranger establishes something shared between the sophist and the philosopher—even if it entails parricide—through their mutual opposition to idiocy. In the “battle between the Gods and the Giants” concerning the beinghood (*ousia*) of beings, both philosopher and sophist oppose those who “maintain strenuously that that alone *is* which allows for some touching and embracing. For they mark off being and body as the same” (ibid., 246a–b). For those “who drag everything by force into the body” it is not only hard, but perhaps impossible for them to give anything other than an inarticulate account. They consign speech (*logos*) to utter noise, lacking all sophistication. If the idiot speaks at all he grunts, reducing speech to the sheer index of a proper name. The idiot is utterly and truly ridiculous, as the Stranger puts it, since he lays claim to a discourse that either immediately subverts itself, or, if forced despite himself to give an account, reduces it to the most trite of platitudes, to that “feast for youths and for oldsters late in learning,” which the Stranger mocks, that insists that “man is man” and that the “good is good” (ibid., 251c). The idiot would have to speak without forging relationships between things, but this amounts to the denial of the *logos*: “Since they’re powerless to keep these out of and not to bring them into their speeches, they don’t need others to refute them. But, as the saying goes, they have their enemy and future opponent right at home, and as they make their way, they always carry around something uttering

speech from deep inside, like that absurd ventriloquist Euricles” (ibid., 252c). “Struck with wonder” due to their “poverty of good sense,” they marvel at the complete vapidness of tautology without being aware that, through this insistence, they destine the *logos* to ruination by destroying signification and the very possibility of relation. So, if these “terrible [deinoùs] men” (ibid., 246b) are forced to speak, to reason, and not just point and grab, they will have to admit that “what has the power to become present to or absent from something certainly *is* something” (ibid., 247a). They will have to admit that being is not simply presence but absence and what they call beinghood is in fact “some sort of swept-along becoming [genesis]” (ibid., 246c).

The sophist is not an idiot, but a joker, making use of the *logos*, not simply to deny it, but to make something of nothing. If the imitator makes of oneself an apparition, to speak of the being of an apparition is to speak of the truly false. The problem is how to make such a claim—a claim that says that “falsehoods genuinely *are*”—without being “hemmed in by contradiction” (ibid., 236e–237a). By bringing everything to “not” the sophist thereby makes the very pretension to knowledge laughable if one does not “dare to pronounce Utter-non-being [tò mēdamōs òn].” To speak of an impostor, one has to speak of a being that is in no way someone as the adverb *mēdamōs* subtly suggests (*mēdé*: “not” + *amōs*: “someone”). Capable of debating all things, this “wondrous sophistic power” (ibid., 233a), the Stranger suggests, is a “deception-inducing” art (ibid., 240d), engendering false opinions, that make the sophist appear wise and knowledgeable. This expertise does not operate by means of subverting the *logos* (like idiocy) but by making its character and characters slip. The sophist plays with sense and thus imperils education (*paideía*) by making of it a joke (*paidía*). The Greek word for “joke,” *paidía*, derives from *pais*, which refers to a child or a slave, and is one signifier away from *paideía*, which is the Greek word for education. Conceived in contrast to *spoudē*, “seriousness” or “earnestness,”

the sophist is a joker, a figure who relates to knowledge as child's play. By playing with this slippage in the Greek between joke and education, *paidía* and *paideía*, Plato shows that philosophy too is not without a sense of humor. The dialogue as a whole is an effort to take seriously the sophist's play in which he unanchors, unmoors, the letter that allows education to slip from health to sickness, from integrity to corruption. The sophist can appear to know everything because he knows nothing, and it is this fundamental inversion that makes the sophist a jester, a comedian, a figure of *paidía*.

The difference between the imposter and the philosopher will thus hinge upon a single letter, a shift in stress, that separates *paidía* and *paideía*. The philosopher will have to anchor this difference, the slippage of the letter, differentiating one enslaved to nonsense and the idle production of opinion from one committed to the joke's earnestness (*spoudē*). Philosophy must educate the jester by thinking the joke. Rather than playing with language for laughs, Plato undertakes to think its condition in *antilegein* by neutralizing its contagious effects. Philosophy must take seriously the task of knowing nothing and thereby sever the bond forged by Democritus between thought and laughter: "Democritus was nicknamed Wisdom and Laughter, because he laughed at the empty aspirations of mankind" (Taylor 1999, p. 59). The *logos* is no laughing matter, and the effort to maintain its gravitas will require nothing less than parricide, the most serious of acts. Yet the overthrow of Parmenides, like the Olympian insurrection, will be for the sake of the institution of a law that saves Father Parmenides, and thus philosophy, from himself. Parmenides's prohibition itself, instituting a separation between being and non-being, becomes a refuge for sophistry. The sophist goes "so far as to deny utterly that the false in any way is: 'For let no one either think or speak Non-being, since in no way at all does Non-being partake of beinghood'" (Plato 1996, 260d). If the assertion of non-being appears at first to be ridiculous, since it subverts the

logos, it is Parmenides's hypothesis, if followed to the letter, that truly subverts the *logos* since it renders the sameness of thinking and being untenable. For the hypothesis that "the one alone is" (ibid., 244b) can easily be countered by appealing to the *logos* of its enunciation. If "one alone is," then why are there two names for some one thing: the "one" and "being"? This is not only a problem of there being many names for some one thing; but it seems to cut to the root of the *logos* as such. If *legein* is *legein tí*, the *logos* itself introduces a division into being that splits it between being as such and the name. The name designates something other than itself. If one avoids this cut by positing the identity of the name and the thing which is named, then one either asserts that the name names nothing, or conversely that the name is only the name of a name (ibid., 240a). In either case, thought becomes imbued with the idiocy of tautology. To preserve being's relation to truth, it becomes necessary to "force" the "way to the conclusion that Non-being in some respect *is* and that Being in turn *is not* in some way" (ibid., 241d). If one does not take on the "paternal argument," "hardly anyone will be able to avoid being ridiculous [katagēlastos]" as they stumble into contradiction (ibid., 241e).

To take nothing seriously is to put into question the relation between being and the one. And the Stranger suggests that "Parmenides and everybody else" have been altogether too casual when "they rushed into a judgement about marking off the 'how many' and the 'what sort' of beings" (ibid., 242c). The path is "danger-ridden" precisely because the philosopher must trade places with the sophist, which is to say, speak like a sophist and dare to utter Non-being. The philosopher must suppose that "Non-being *is*" (ibid., 237a) and risk stumbling into the trap of an irreparable contradiction. The ambition of Plato's *Sophist* is to take the laughable seriously, risking appearing "mad [manikos]" (ibid., 242a) and altogether "discordant," but this risk is necessary in order to shift the terrain of the *logos* from that of the joke to irony. "If, then, not as a point of contention or a joke

but in earnest, one of Parmenides' listeners had to think it out and to answer the question, 'Where must this name Non-being be applied?', how do we think he would use the name—for what purpose and for what sort of thing? And how would he show this to the one who inquired?' (ibid., 237b–c). The aim is to kill or neutralize sophistry's irresponsible child's play with philosophical earnestness. Yet, this neutralization requires confrontation with non-being.

If to speak truly is to say something and not nothing, then language is always language about something that *is*: *légein* is *légein tí*. Non-being is thus not *a* being. One cannot say that non-being is indeed something. The Stranger focuses on the notion of "some [tí]." The Stranger claims that there is a necessity that binds the relation implied by "some" to being "some *one*" (ibid., 237d). Non-being is not a being in the sense of being either one or many. As soon as one speaks of "some," this itself implies a relation to beings: "to use it alone, naked and isolated, as it were, from all the beings—that's impossible" (ibid.). "Thus," Heidegger writes, "every τὸ [tí] co-signifies a ἕν [hén], i.e., in the broadest sense, a number" (Heidegger 1997, p. 290). This is the necessity of all counting and accounting. One counts something, which is to say, some-one. "For you will say that singular 'some' is in fact a sign of one, dual 'some' of two, and plural 'some' of many [...]. And so it's utterly necessary, it seems, that he who says 'not some' [mè tí] is saying no-thing at all [mēdèn]" (Plato 1996, 237d–e). One says "nothing" precisely because one says something about nothing and thus "counts" the uncountable by treating it either as a plurality (non-beings) or as a unity (non-being). It is thus structurally impossible, given that *légein* is *légein tí*, "to utter or speak or think Non-being all by itself [tò mè òn autò kath' hautó]—that it is unthinkable [adíanōtón] and unspeakable ['unsayable': *árrhēton*, and 'voiceless': *áphthenkton*] and irrational [álogon]" (ibid., 238c). Nothing or non-being *all by itself* is utterly paradoxical and perplexing, since it cannot be

refuted. To utter it assigns to it a status that it cannot have and thereby puts the “refuter” him or herself into “perplexity,” for it forces the one who relates to it to say or think the opposite (*en-antía*) (ibid., 238d). To address it at all, even through the form of negation, assigns to it a unity, “the form of a one” betraying the fact that it is neither one nor many. One cannot speak correctly about it, since the “very act of accosting” it addresses “it in the form of a one” (ibid., 239a).

In order to speak of non-being Plato has to suspend the *légein té*, marking the space between saying and saying something, the very gap mobilized by sophistry. He has to distrust the *logos*'s compelling force. He does this by suspending the “one,” establishing a relation between that which cannot be counted *and* the act of taking account of that which cannot be counted. There is some “nothing” that *is*, but cannot be counted: namely the unlimited (*ápeiron*). Non-being takes the “unlimited in multitude” into the account. But by being taken into account, it makes the one who speaks speak ridiculously: one has to say and think something genuinely strange, claiming the “non” as not not-being. “Non” belongs to being through being *other* to being. Thus, we encounter the famous thesis of the dialogue: “Whenever we say Non-being, as it seems, we don't say something contrary to Being but only other” (ibid., 257b). Non-being does not signify the opposite of being (nothingness), but only its other (ibid., 258b).

The sophist has been hooked with the very instrument by which it enters into debate (*antilégein*). He has been hooked like a fish, from below and by the mouth. As a form of *antilégein*, sophistry has the capacity, the power (*dynaméis*), to relate everything that is said to nothing. But philosophy must separate the nothing from itself, non-being from not-being, and thus determine the sense in which non-being can be said to be. The sophistical play between “non” and “not” can be brought to halt.

There is no “nothing” that is not “some,” but the “some” that nothing is, is not “one.”

If non-being can only be addressed as “not a one,” as “unlimited in multitude,” in order to not err in the attribution of being to what is not, then the truly parricidal consequence of the dialogue must be drawn: being itself is not one. “Do you not see then that we have disobeyed Parmenides far beyond his prohibition?” (Ibid., 258c) Being can only be determined as *one* if it is non-identical with itself, withdrawn from accountability. Being can be held to account only if there is something that is not countable, namely non-being. Or conversely, for being *to be* one, for the one to be determinate of the beinghood of being, being has to be affected by itself. Yet, by entering into relation to itself it becomes not “a” one, but many. It enters into community with others. To deny this relation is to deny speech and thus deprive thought of its voice.¹³ “To detach each from all is the final and utter eclipse of all speech. For Speech has arisen for us through the interweaving of the forms” (ibid., 259e). To speak of the beinghood (*ousia*) of being requires that we think the weave of its determination. Something can only be said to be if it communes (*proskoinōnoîn*) with beinghood (ibid., 252a). But then being is non-identical with that with which it mixes, namely itself. Being has to be thought from the outset as riven: in relation and apart, as mixture and non-mixture, as included and as excluded. Without this minimal distinction, without being’s separation from itself, determination as such (of being or, for that matter, anything else) would not be possible.

Being differs from itself through a form that allows a being to be delimited, marked off as separated from all the beings it is not.

¹³ The Stranger argues that speech (*logos*) requires the “blending” of nouns and verbs and it is this “interweaving” that makes possible *légein* as *légein tí* (ibid., 262a–e). Remarkably, he claims that thinking and speech are the same, differentiating them by means of an inner and outer voice. Thought is “the soul’s inner conversation with itself, when it arises without voice” (ibid., 263e).

There is a “form [eidos] of Non-being” (ibid., 258d) which is the Other (*tháteron*). The form of the Other is what allows one being to differ from another; it separates being from non-being. Being is other to the others, and in this way it is not. Being establishes its difference from beings through the Other. However, the Other is defined as what is “always in relation to an other” (ibid., 255c). It is this definition that necessitates that Being and the Other are “entirely different” (ibid., 255d). There cannot be an other that is, so to speak, absolutely Other: an Other that is not in relation to *an* other. If the absolutely other existed, there would be no way of differentiating Being and the Other: “if the Other partook of both the forms you granted, as does Being, there would sometimes also be an other among the others that is unrelated to any other. And yet it has now inescapably fallen out for us that whatever is other is what it is necessarily through an other” (ibid., 255d). The form of the Other is thus paradoxical, even if the Stranger does not state this as such, since it would be a form that is without limit, unbounded, *ápeiron*. It is perhaps what one could call the pure unformed. The Stranger says, “Then regarding each of the forms, Being is many, while Non-being is unlimited in multitude [*ápeiron dè plēthei tò mē ón*]” (ibid., 256e). Being is other to the others, and therefore “many,” by virtue of the form of the Other, since it mixes with everything that is, but in being other to the many (others), the others are not and are thus unlimited in multitude. The form of the Other is *ápeiron* (an unlimited multitude). “Then we must also say that Being itself is other than the others [...]. And also that however many the others are, in relation to so many, Being is *not*. For insofar as it is not those others, it is itself one; and again it is *not* in relation to those others, which are unlimited in number” (ibid., 257a). The nature of the Other is thus to not be a one (to be unlimited, unaccountable). In separating Being from the Other, being is always “a” being, that is, countable as one (even if many). Being makes the Other thinkable as non-being (the other of being), repeating the separating of Being and Other through an

infinite procedure of counting. Since there is not an Other to the other, its nature is “all chopped up” (ibid., 257c). The Other is as “distributed” through the unlimited multitude of what is not. It is the very relationality of things (ibid., 258e).

In order to contain the wild appearance of the sophist, the Stranger introduces the form of the unlimited. The form of the formless is thus pitted against formlessness of form. And it is perhaps this very difference that Theaetetus and the Stranger discover in their pursuit of this illusive figure, the sophist, who always seems to be out of place, unable to be pinned down, disguised. The dialogue itself confirms above all that “the man is wondrous in his very being and utterly difficult to keep in our sights, since even now he’s fled, in very good and clever fashion, down into a form that offers no passage for our tracking” (ibid., 236d). As they pursue the tortuous path of this protean figure, they cannot help but stepping into a trap intended, rather, for their prey. At the end of the dialogue, they encounter the enigma of their own philosophical image, distorted, disfigured, caricatured, in the face of the sophist. In looking for the sophist they find instead the philosopher, but it is a philosopher no longer in control of the *logos*, no longer in control of its own image. They encounter, in short, a philosophical impersonation.

Is the Stranger’s impersonation of Socrates sophistical or philosophical? Is this Stranger to be distrusted? The dialogue ends as a kind of warning to know *who* it is with whom one speaks, since not even philosophy can be fully insulated from treachery and betrayal. Philosophy requires a minimum of trust. If unanchored from being, discourse or speech (the *logos*) becomes a treacherous medium—and all the more so if mobilized with nefarious intentions. The philosopher should admire the act of treachery, study its workings, but remember to hate a traitor. And it is not accidental that the sophist does not appear as a subject (an

interlocutor) who speaks, but only as an object of discourse.¹⁴ As an object, the sophist can be depicted archetypically as the figure who overturns the authority of the *logos*, unbinding it from its capacity to signify, to designate, to represent. An impersonator is not a viable interlocutor, since he undoes the legitimacy of the *logos* by not recognizing that the I of the speaker (the self) is committed by speech to abide by the law that necessitates consistency in one's speech. If one does not know with whom one is speaking, then the I of the other cannot be relied upon to recognize the truth or falsity of what one says. The speaker who speaks is thus not responsible for their speech and cannot be held to account. As such, the authority of the *logos* that depends upon the mutual recognition that signification cannot intend its opposite—this minimal criterion of consistent, rational, discourse—is challenged by a figure who does not accept *the principle of identity*.

This is the insidious and subversive nature of sophistry: its power to make that which is the same other. And we should perhaps not be surprised that in the end we encounter this being, whose very being consists in being Other—the sophist—in its Other—the philosopher. Is this the final irony or the beginning of a ludicrous joke? It is doubtless a token of Plato's deep respect for this enemy of truth. Lacking an identity, the sophist can only be glimpsed in the distortions it induces in its other, just as the figure who claims to lack knowledge can only be exhibited through exposing the falsity of the opinions of those who claim to know. Philosophy cannot speak to, but only *about* sophistry; one has to recast sophistry in the image of philosophy in order to force its submission to a rule of discourse that it does not recognize. And even this is tricky, as the inversion of the sophist and the philosopher portends. Even as an object it threatens to subvert the philosophical subject. "You see, then, how true it is to say that this beast is complex" (*ibid.*, 226a).

¹⁴ Jean-Claude Milner emphasizes this precise point (2012, pp. 114–15).

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