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The Writer as an Acrobat: Deleuze and Guattari on the Relation between Philosophy and Literature (and How Kierkegaard Moves in-between)

Daphne Giofkou

Introduction: On the Mobile Relations between Philosophy and Literature

All philosophy is condemned, to the extent that it is dependent on figuration, to be literary and, as the depository of this very problem, all literature is to some extent philosophical.¹ The above-cited passage from Paul de Man’s essay ‘The Epistemology of Metaphor’ describes a recurrent gesture in the history of philosophy: philosophical discourse, defending its epistemological rigour and its truth claims, seeks to suppress the literary, to mark the territory of the literary inside literature ‘by keeping it, so to speak, in its place.’² As the figurality of language, according to de Man, permeates both literature and philosophy, there is no innocent reference either to ‘the nonverbal “outside”’³ or to an inner presence of consciousness. Is it possible, then, to think the relation between philosophy and literature beyond suppression or imposition of a hierarchy?

Deleuze’s philosophy not only attests to such a possibility but, more importantly, his own writings as well as his collaborations with Guattari explore the relations between these two realms in their multiple becomings, ‘in a perpetual in-between movement, or perpetuum mobile,’ as André Pierre Colombat aptly puts it, in which philosophy and literature ‘are interconnected.’⁴ For example, whereas de Man’s reading of (philosophical and literary) texts appeals to a third factor, namely, the rhetorical substratum of all language, Deleuze prefers the smooth space⁵ rather than the substratum, allows for philosophy-becoming-literature, talks about literature as ‘an assemblage’, e.g. Kafka’s literary machine is ‘plugged into’ the bureaucratic machine in order to work (ATP 4). Art, science and philosophy are, according to Deleuze, ‘caught up into mobile relations’ – we could say cinematic/machinic relations – ‘in which each is obliged to respond to the other, but by its own means’ rather than ‘statable’ ones.⁶ Deleuze’s engagement

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² Paul de Man, Aesthetic 34.
⁵ Smooth space as a Deleuzean concept denotes the unlimited, acentered, open space of the nomads, which privileges flows and movement in contradistinction to the striated space that is hierarchically constructed and evaluated. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, ‘Treatise on Nomadology-The War Machine,’ A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 351-423. (Hereafter ATP)
with literature is an endeavor to chart this mobility, rather than to trace the common ground between philosophy and literature.

In *What is Philosophy?* (1991), Deleuze with Guattari offer the image of writers, such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche but also Kleist, Mallarmé, Kafka, and D. H. Lawrence, who, like acrobats, dancers, and athletes, leap, dance, and stretch between the two planes of literature and philosophy. And yet:

To be sure they do not produce a synthesis of art and philosophy. They branch out and they do not stop branching out [*bifurquer*]. They are hybrid geniuses who neither erase nor cover over differences in kind, but, on the contrary, use all the resources of their ‘athleticism’ to install themselves within this very difference, like acrobats torn apart in a perpetual show of strength.\(^7\)

‘These thinkers,’ we would call them acrobat-writers, ‘are “half” philosophers but also much more than philosophers’ (WP 67). What accounts for such an excess – the ‘much more’ – is exactly the fact that they dwell as much as bifurcate/‘branch out’ in this differential ‘within’ philosophy and literature.

The latter is best illustrated with the creation of, what Deleuze and Guattari call, ‘conceptual personae’ or ‘intercessors’ (WP 64). Conceptual personae, such as Plato’s Socrates or Diotima, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra or Kierkegaard’s knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling* (1843), could be considered as a literary technique introduced in philosophy with the scope to articulate (philosophical) perspectives or theses. However, this view is partially reductive; the conceptual personae are not abstractions, although ‘they play a part in the very creation of the author’s concepts’ (WP 63). Inhabiting the in-between of philosophy and literature, a conceptual persona thinks, moves, and acts expressing new ‘possibilities of life or modes of existence’ (WP 73).\(^8\)

Thus, Zarathustra is the subject of Nihilism as the knight of faith is the subject of religious existence. In other words, the conceptual persona is both a philosopher’s creation and the creation of a philosopher: ‘The conceptual persona is the becoming or the subject of a philosophy, on a par with the philosopher’ insofar as Nietzsche in becoming Zarathustra/Dionysus says ‘“I dance as Dionysus”’ (WP 64) or Kierkegaard in becoming the knight of faith may as well say: ‘I leap.’

Accordingly, the advantage of Deleuze and Guattari’s approach to literature is that the impasse of representation (i.e., literature represents life, philosophy thinks about life, literature influences philosophy, and vice versa) is overcome. This becomes particularly evident in their analysis of the three novellas written by Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Pierrette Fleutiaux respectively in plateau 8 of *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980): ‘1874: Three Novellas, or “What happened?”’ The purpose of this paper is: initially, to trace the import of style in philosophy and literature as Deleuze and Guattari construe it in terms of the creation of the new; next, to explore how the relation between literature and philosophy is refracted in Novellas plateau, regarding the questions of secrecy and time; finally, to consider the way in which the

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recourse to Kierkegaard’s writings, especially *Fear and Trembling*, elucidates key philosophical terms coined by Deleuze and Guattari. This line of exposition has a twofold aim: to identify the distinctiveness of Deleuze and Guattari’s approach to literature and to expound what Kierkegaard as a religious writer has to offer in the discussion of philosophy as literature.

**The Question of Style in Philosophy and Literature**

Deleuze, as early as in *Difference and Repetition* (1968), stated in a quasi-normative way that ‘a book of philosophy should be in part a very particular species of detective novel, in part a kind of science fiction. By detective novel we mean that concepts, with their zones of presence, should intervene to resolve local situations.’ As a consequence, concepts ‘themselves change along with the problems’, they act like characters in a drama. The same question about style and time returns and is posited with respect to the writing of a philosophical book but also to the reading of the history of philosophy. Deleuze maintains that ‘the time is coming when it will hardly be possible to write a book of philosophy as it has been done for so long: “Ah! the old style ...”’ In the history of philosophy the time of the new style has already begun with Nietzsche and yet the time of the new style should be reached in the future. It seems that Deleuze invites us to read and write about ‘a real book of past philosophy as if it were an imaginary and feigned book’, asking the questions ‘What happened? / What is going to happen?’, until our present text comes to meet the text of the past as its double. Philosophy is not a sterile exegetical exercise but a creative act.

When Deleuze was asked in an interview (1988) how he sees ‘the question of the philosophical style,’ he defined style in philosophy as ‘the movement of concepts … a modulation, and a straining of one’s whole language towards something outside it.’ He goes on to compare philosophy with the novel:

> Philosophy’s like a novel: we have to ask ‘What is going to happen?’ ‘What’s happened?’ Except the characters are concepts, and the settings, the scenes are space-times. One’s always writing to bring something to life, to free life from where it’s trapped, to trace lines of flight.

Modulation, a term borrowed from poetry, music, and painting (or even respiratory systems, life sciences), expresses temporal relations and variations in the same manner that the questions about the future (‘What is going to happen?’) and about the past (‘What’s happened?’) seek to decipher the sequence of events not from a localised point in the present, as these questions are traditionally understood, but from a point that is continuously shifting. The question of style and the question of temporal sequence seem to interflow in an unexpected mode: the act of writing, for Deleuze, is to liberate life and ‘to make us see’ things that we weren’t previously aware that they existed (N 141). Between what has passed and what is going to pass, things ‘come to pass, a spark can flash and break out of language itself’ (N 141) until everything becomes pure passage of life. Not because language strives towards the inexpressible or breaks in a moment of revelation but because writing creates lines of flight, new space-times, ‘mapping, even realms that are yet to come,’ (ATP 5) as Deleuze and Guattari put it in *A Thousand Plateaus*. For

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10 Deleuze, ‘Preface,’ *Difference and Repetition* xxii. (ellipses in the original)
11 Deleuze, ‘Preface,’ *Difference and Repetition* xxii-xxiii.

Deleuze, what suggests the presence of style is ‘when the words produce sparks leaping between them, even over great distances,’ (N 142) invoking thus the genesis of something beyond the semantic field of the words themselves.

The question of style is not addressed in the field of rhetorics but the style of a writer, Deleuze and Guattari remark, with her specific materials (the syntax, the creation of new words that violate the maternal language) ‘summons forth a people to come’ (WP 176-7). Carsten Meiner rightly notes that the style thus understood ‘seems to have an existential function.’ In an important essay entitled ‘Life and Literature’ (1993), Deleuze underscores the existential aspect of writing as follows: ‘Writing is a question of becoming [devenir], always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed’ and to become means to become other (a woman, an animal, a minority), something ‘unforeseen and nonpreexistent [non-préexistants].’ Hence, both philosophy and literature strive to bring forth the ‘nonpreexistent’; insofar as writing ‘consists in inventing a people that is missing … a people to come [à venir] … a possibility of life,’ correspondingly, Deleuze seems to suggest, the writer herself as much as the philosopher are in the process of becoming, they are ‘a people to come.’

Thus far, the multifarious relation between movement, becoming, and transformation has surfaced many times while reading Deleuze and Guattari’s texts. In this respect, we see the notion of temporality implicated in this construal of becoming, an issue to which we will turn in the next section.

The Novellas Plateau: Secrecy and Time
The Novellas plateau begins by distinguishing between the literary genres of novella, novel and tale on the different questions that these genres pose to the readers. In novella, everything revolves ‘around the question, “What happened? Whatever could have happened?”’, whereas the tale breathes in and out with the question ‘what is going to happen?’ The living present of the novel as duration is constituted by integrating ‘elements from the novella and the tale’ in varied modes (ATP 192). The distinctions drawn between these genres while corresponding to the three dimensions of time (past, present and future) should not be viewed, as Deleuze and Guattari warn, in a strict chronological sequence. The present is traversed by movements (of lines) that ‘are contemporaneous with it’; one line moves by casting everything ‘into the past from the moment it is present (novella) while another simultaneously draws it into the future (tale)’ (ATP 193, emphasis in original). The moment renders the present – ‘from the moment it is present’ – quite precarious as the latter is schizized into two different directions. As Deleuze writes in The Logic of Sense (1969), ‘each present is divided into past and future, ad infinitum’ and therefore the present forms an unlimited line ‘the two extremities of which endlessly distance themselves from each other.’ The time of the pure event is not tensed in the present – it is happening – but is both the time of novella (‘it just happened’) and the time of the tale (it ‘is always about to happened’).
Bearing in mind these remarks, it follows that the presence of the present in novella is construed differently from that of both the tale and the novel. Though the question ‘What happened?’ directs one to the/a past, the novella itself does not aim at uncovering of a memory or unearthing of something past but rather ‘plays upon a fundamental forgetting’ (ATP 193). Thus, Deleuze and Guattari write that ‘the novella has a fundamental relation to secrecy (not with a secret matter or object to be discovered, but with the form of the secret, which remains impenetrable)’ (ATP 193, emphasis in the original). In other words, the novella does not contain a secret as an irretrievable content, something inexpressible in words, or as an event unknowable because of its missing details, but what happened becomes purely ‘imperceptible’ (ATP 193). The temporality of novella is defined by its relation ‘in the present itself, to the formal dimension of something that has happened, even if that something is nothing or remains unknowable’ (ATP 194).

Therefore, the secrecy and the temporal cannot be extricated from each other. From one part, the question ‘What happened?’ is hollowed out of its hermeneutical value, works against itself, becomes ‘the ungivable “What happened?”’ (ATP 197) Deleuze and Guattari initiate a ‘perceptual semiotics’ (ATP 194) between the body postures assumed and the secret: I may hump guilty-ridden, become exhausted, and bend under the burden of the secret – ‘the better hidden the more ordinary it was’ (ATP 197). The novella thus ‘enacts’ the secret by a means of enfolding unlike the tale that unfolds events in the process of narration. The primary body posture of novella is ‘like inverse suspense’ (ATP 193-4). The text, and the time in the text, is curved and moulded into the form of secrecy, the enfolding, until all forms dissolve into ‘a pure abstract line’ (ATP 197). As Claire Colebrook suggests, Deleuze and Guattari transform ‘the ontology of the secret’ by moving away from the secret as content to secrecy as structure that determines the interpretive horizon of the subject; additionally, by gesturing beyond the form-content opposition they affirm ‘a proliferating secrecy’ or imperceptibility that is life itself in its multiplicity of relations.17

For Deleuze and Guattari, the novella names the specific way a text combines the several lines that traverse and compose us: ‘Lines of writing conjugate with other lines, life lines, lines of luck or misfortune, lines productive of the variation of the line of writing itself, lines that are between the lines of writing’ (ATP 194, emphasis in the original). There are three kinds of lines: A rigid line of segmentarity, a line largely defined by the certificate of birth and death. Everyday life is marked by finite pieces of information, finite actions and sets of time periods, segments of space (territories), in which we move and acquire our identity until the post-mortem rigidity: I have a date at 4 pm, I live at the West Side of the city, I have a class to attend between 7 pm and 9 pm, and so on. There is also a line of molecular or supple segmentation made up of ‘micromovements,’ ‘tiny cracks,’ ‘secret lines of disorientation or deterritorialization’ (ATP 196-97, emphasis in the original), whence the possibilities of another life, a life no less real and present, struck as ‘a moonbeam’ (ATP 195). Finally, a point is reached when no segmentarity is tolerated, all previous positions are de-posed. This line of flight is like making the other two lines explode, as Deleuze and Guattari note; it is ‘absolute deterritorialization’ (ATP 197). The lines of flight cannot be represented or captured by any means because we are ‘in the process of drawing them’ (ATP 199).

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It is appropriate here to recall that Deleuze and Guattari conjoin writing with creating new possibilities of life, liberating a new space-time. How do they read these life lines/lines of writing in Henry James’s novella In the Cage (1898)? The heroine is a young girl who works at the Post Office; she dispatches telegrams for her upper-class clients, counting ‘numberless’ words, receiving and sending intimate but segmentary contents of their private lives. ‘In a framed and wired confinement,’ in her cage, in her territory, she conjures up stories from these bits of information. She becomes particularly entangled into the secrecy of the telegrams exchanged by a rich couple as well as into the secrecy of their love affair. She soon leads a kind of a ‘double life’: ‘As the weeks went on there she lived more and more into the world of whiffs and glimpses, she found her divinations work faster and stretch further.’ Deleuze and Guattari remark that the girl sensed that the man is in danger because of a secret, though the secret itself is never defined and does not need to be defined by Henry James. Telegram texts, material and yet immaterial segments, seem to illustrate best the line of molecular segmentation, on which we are close to something that has already happened but ‘the ungraspable matter of that something is entirely molecularized, travelling at speeds beyond the ordinary thresholds of perception’ (ATP 196, my emphasis). In terms of (linguistic) communication, this line abounds with ‘silences’ and ‘innuendos’ in contrast to the clear-cut segments of ‘interminable explanations,’ of ‘questions and answers’ we encounter on the first line of rigid segmentarity (ATP 198). At the end, the interpretive skills of the girl are stretched to the point that she cannot withstand any form of ‘gaps and blanks and absent answers.’ Deleuze and Guattari cite and underline the phrase ‘There were no longer shadows to help her see more clearly, only glare’ (ATP 197) as a point of maximum intensity and maximum affectivity whereby everything has changed and everything becomes imperceptible; it accentuates a turning point in her life in which she has reached a new line, a line of flight.

In its most ordinary sense, Deleuze and Guattari aver, ‘the secret always has to do with love, and sexuality.’ But in becoming imperceptible, the secret and the form of secrecy has changed again. It means becoming ‘a clandestine passenger on a motionless voyage’: clandestine because his secrecy is not covered (a clandestine passenger is ‘like everybody else’); motionless because his movement is like jumping ‘linearly’ on a train in motion (ATP 197-198), an allusion to the Kierkegaardian leap of faith. For Deleuze and Guattari, Kierkegaard’s knight of faith serves as a figure, as a conceptual persona, of this clandestine motion, which occurs beyond the ordinary threshold of perception:

As Kierkegaard says, nothing distinguishes the knight of the faith from a bourgeois German going home or to the post office: he sends off no special telegraphic sign; he constantly produces or reproduces finite segments, yet he is already moving on a line no one even suspects. (ATP 197)

The reference here is to Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling, which was published under the pseudonym Johannes de silentio. In Kierkegaard’s recounting of the Genesis story (Gen 22, 1-
Abraham’s journey to Mount Moriah under God’s command to sacrifice Isaac, his only begotten son, is made in faith that he will receive his son back and in keeping silence about the purpose of his journey. The moment that Abraham raises the knife with his hand, an angel of God prevents Abraham from completing the sacrifice, giving back to him his beloved son. The knight of faith repeats Abraham’s journey-movement at every moment of his life by infinitely resigning everything and by receiving everything back again ‘[in] temporality, [in] finitude.’

By performing this ‘double-movement’ (FT 36) – renouncing and receiving back – the knight of faith ‘belongs entirely to the world,’ writes Kierkegaard, without revealing ‘a bit of heterogeneous optical telegraphy from the infinite’ (FT 39, my emphasis). There is nothing external that would ‘distinguish him from the rest of the crowd’; in fact, he does resemble a ‘bourgeois philistine,’ engaging himself in the most mundane tasks and activities (FT 39).

And yet, yet the whole earthly figure he presents is a new creation by virtue of the absurd. He resigned everything infinitely, and then he grasps everything again by virtue of the absurd. He is continually making the movement of infinity, but he does it with such precision and assurance that continually gets finitude out of it, and no one ever suspect anything else. (FT 40-1, my emphasis)

For Johannes de silentio what the knight of faith achieves continually and repeatedly, at every moment, it is ‘to change the leap into life into walking, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian … and this is the one and only marvel’ (FT 41). The marvel does not consist in the fact that the knight of faith performs the impressive movement of leap, but in transforming his leap into a walk, he becomes imperceptible, like everybody else. He properly installs himself ‘in a zone of indetermination, of indiscernibility’ (WP 173), which only life and literature can create.

Even if there is no mention of ‘a bourgeois German’ (ATP 197) going to the post office in Kierkegaard’s text, the line of association — the telegraph line — exists. The introduction of the term ‘thresholds of perception’ is crucial as it leads to plateau 10 of becomings, ‘1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible…,’ where Deleuze and Guattari continue referring to Kierkegaard’s text. The knight of faith, ‘the man of becoming’ (ATP 279), as they renamed him, moves in a straight, abstract line, unsuspected by the others; he does not follow pre-traced lines of faith (lines as guides) but he draws the lines on which he moves concurrently with his movement/becoming. ‘Becoming everybody/the whole world (tout le monde)’ equates with an act of creation and recreation — means both ‘to make a world’ and to make ‘the world a becoming.’ Most importantly, in becoming everybody/becoming the world/becoming imperceptible, one does not transcend the world but ‘the world that becomes’ overlays the first world until there are not two worlds but a kind of transparency. In this way, it is possible one ‘to be present at the dawn of the world’ (ATP 280).

Via Kierkegaard’s knight of faith, Deleuze and Guattari elucidate the fact that the lines of flight, contrary to the ordinary significance of the words, are not an escape from the world but reside in immanence (ATP 204). Not without some awkwardness they remark that ‘it is odd that the word “faith”’ is used by Kierkegaard to describe the infinite movement and the returning to

the world to receive back the finite – the lost girl23 or the lost son – insofar as the knight of faith ‘regathers the finite’ (ATP 282). From one part, movement always occurs ‘below and above the threshold of perception,’ in a kind of interval (ATP 280-1). All we can perceive are segments, dislocations of bodies in space, finite parts of an infinite movement in time, a movement that we ignore its beginning and end. But to become everybody requires ‘asceticism’, dismantling of ‘everything that roots each of us (everybody) to ourselves’ (ATP 279), an excess of love that overflows into creation, into new thresholds of perception. Is this a new faith then?

At first sight, Deleuze and Guattari’s reading of Fear and Trembling underscores the pedestrian of walking rather than the sublime of the leap. According to their interpretation, ‘in jumping from one plane to the other,’ that is, the plane of transcendence and the plane of immanence, the knight of faith continually expresses the relation between the two planes reaching ‘the absolute threshold’; therefore, what it cannot be perceptible (the plane of transcendence) becomes perceived (ATP 281-2). The knight of faith changes perception (ATP 282) by changing himself in his passion, whilst he himself becomes imperceptible. To add another layer, it is also Deleuze and Guattari who jump with maximum velocity from plateau 8 to plateau 10, from Henry James’s novella to Kierkegaard’s text among others, showing ‘an athleticism of becoming’ (WP 172) in their own writing of A Thousand Plateaus.

**Novella’s Time: Kierkegaard’s Novellas and the Turning Point**

The question that is raised here is for what reason Deleuze and Guattari turn from a modernist novella as it is Henry James’s In the Cage to a text such as Fear and Trembling, which does not belong to the genre of novella. Johannes de silentio marvels at the movements that the knight of faith performs but he comes as far as this limit; he cannot give an account how/when faith originates but awkwardly remarks: ‘only then does faith commence, nec opinate [unexpected], by virtue of the absurd’ (FT 69). What Kierkegaard offers is the threshold of perception at the limit of the ordinary and the marvellous, but in doing so he invokes and rebuts the temporal structures of the novella, particularly of the German Romantic tradition. We will try to follow the trajectory of this refutation from his Journal notes to the pseudonymous authorship.

The German Romantics not only wrote novellas but produced a theoretical discourse reflecting on the formal aspects of novella under the category of the new. One of the definitive characteristics of novella is the narration of ‘an unheard-of event that has occurred’, according to Goethe’s famous definition, while Tieck considered that the plot of the novella should be built around ‘a strange, striking turning point (Wendepunkt).’24 The novella often creates the effect of the marvellous or uncanny by interweaving in its plot-structure something ‘mysterious’ and ‘unfathomable.’25 Kierkegaard’s critical stance towards the romantic indifference to actuality is reflected in his comments regarding Tieck’s plays in The Concept of Irony (1841). He writes that one who reads Tieck and the rest of the romantic poets ‘gain[s] a notion of the unheard-of and highly improbable things that take place in their poetic world. … Nothing becomes everything, and everything becomes nothing; everything is possible, even the impossible’.26 Kierkegaard uses the word ‘turning point [Wendepunkt]’ to designate the critical point of change in history

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23 The reference is to Regina Olsen, Kierkegaard’s fiancée, with whom he broke his engagement.
where the new breaks forth and the old is annulled. More often, he uses the expression ‘discrimen rerum’ as the break of sin in the individual or he talks about the moment as ‘a discrimen [boundary]’ that divides the past, the future, and the eternal (CA 90-1).

In Kierkegaard’s Journals, there are a number of entries regarding his relationship with his father or his broken engagement with Regina that could be rearranged and read as a novella, or explicitly refer to this specific genre.

In a novella titled ‘The Mysterious Family,’ I could perhaps reproduce the tragedy of my childhood: the terrifying, secret explanation of the religious that was granted me in a fearful intimation, which the powers of my imagination then hammered into shape – my offense at the religious. It would begin in a thoroughly patriarchal-idyllic fashion, so that no one would suspect anything before that word suddenly resounded, providing a terrifying explanation of everything.

Equally ambiguous are the entries around the ‘great earthquake’:

Then it was that the great earthquake took place, the frightful upheaval that suddenly forced upon me a new, infallible law of interpretation for all phenomena. Then I sensed that my father’s advanced age was not a divine blessing, but rather a curse.

There are allusions to a sin of his father, but the text with much assuredness points towards the burden of guilt that the whole family must bear and the death of his siblings as punishment: ‘that our memory would be entirely blotted out, that no trace of us would remain.’ What happened? Whatever could have happened? How could a single event – a word or an earthquake – become the rule of interpretation for everything? As George Pattison has argued:

Seen in the enigmatic mirror of such texts, ‘Søren Kierkegaard’ becomes the title of a dramatic tale that might be construed as a modern Antigone and that might equally well have provided the plot for a novella or play by one of the writers of the modernist breakthrough of the later nineteenth century – an Ibsen, a Strindberg, a Dostoevsky, or such twentieth-century continuers of that tradition as Kafka or Bergman.

Whereas ‘the actual content’ of the sin committed by Kierkegaard’s father may be ‘more or less accidental’, most important, writes Pattison, is the theological thought that Kierkegaard developed about repentance and the forgiveness of sin. For ‘the movement of sin, and the movement of faith in which sin is overcome’ remains ultimately something ‘unrepressantable … a secret and a mystery.’

On 16 October 1843, nearly two years after breaking his engagement with Regina Olsen and a few months after being informed about her own engagement, Kierkegaard published Repetition.

27 Kierkegaard, Concept of Irony 260.
31 SKS 27, 291-292/Pap. 305:3 (1843-45). As translated in Garff 132.
33 George Pattison 167.
34 George Pattison 170.
under the pseudonym Constantin Constantius.³⁵ As the storyline goes, Constantin met a young man of a melancholy nature and soon became his confidant. The young man was humbly in love with a girl, but, as Constantin recounts the story, the whole love affair became a burden to him. Unable either to move forward and complete the relationship with a marriage or to break off and give an explanation to the girl, the young man escapes to Stockholm from where he sends a number of letters addressed to Constantin. What had happened? There is no explanation how life ‘has mocked him [the young man] by making him guilty where he was innocent.’³⁶ The young man awaits a marvel that would make possible to get the girl back. Instead, he reads in a newspaper that the girl was married to someone else, deeming this as a divine sign that he is now been released from any commitment (R 220). This contingent event is actually a mockery of the ‘turning point’ in the narration; nothing new occurs, no transformation affects the young man, no repetition is achieved. What is lost – the lost girl – is not restored to him through forgiveness. At the end of the book, Constantin revokes any genre identification – ‘it is not a comedy, tragedy, novel, novella [Novelle], epic, or epigram’ (R 226) – as if any aesthetic category would be a mystification of the past.

The lines of life and the lines of writing intermingle, as Deleuze and Guattari would have noted. The temporality of novella is extended beyond the limits of the genre. Journal notes, letters, suicidal notes, and in general every text with ‘blanks and gaps’ bear resemblance to telegram texts. What is it that which needs explanation and in what does this explanation consist of? What makes the secrecy of the secret is precisely the explanation, the enfolding of one into the other. Kierkegaard’s insight here is – and at this point he moves away from the Romantic novella to an area closer to modernism – that not only there is a turning point that marks a radical change, but (a) the turning point of change is itself ‘invisible’ (b) the repeatability of the turning point at every moment undoes the past and makes everything new (CA 17-18n). However, this movement of repetition requires faith and it is faith in repetition, in forgiveness.

Conclusion
From what precedes, it is evident that temporality and transformation within time constitutes a common problematic for philosophy and literature. By focusing on Kierkegaard’s knight of faith we are in position to better understand the figure of the acrobat-writer. What gives strength to the acrobat is not the confidence that he will not fall down while leaping or his forgetting that he fell in the past but the faith that he will repeat the movement of the leap anew, at the threshold of the ordinary and the marvellous. Therefore, Deleuze and Guattari’s remarks about Kierkegaard as an acrobat-writer who leaps between literature and philosophy are justified in view of his authorship; except that Kierkegaard may be stretching from and towards another plane, that of theology.

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³⁵ See the ‘Historical Introduction,’ Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling/Repetition, ix-xxxix.
³⁶ Kierkegaard, Repetition 185-6. (Hereafter R)

Gilles Deleuze’s explicit and self-conscious entanglements with the arts are well-known, especially his particular obsession with cinema. And as multiple theorists of the emerging interdisciplinary field of comics studies have observed, there is a close connection between comics and the cinema. More specifically, it is often argued that the comics, as an artform consisting of a sequence of (textual and pictorial) images, is actually both a literal and conceptual precursor of the cinema – in that cinema merely takes the individual panels of the comic book and then animates them using the camera. Consequently, it would seem that Deleuze and comics would almost of necessity have at least something to say to – and create with – each other. There is of course a tremendous variety within the medium of comic books, but following Deleuze and Guattari’s suggestion (in the Introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*) that there is something ‘special’ about the United States, I will focus on the classic comic book as it has developed there. More importantly, it is in the U.S. the superhero genre has been most popular and widespread, and I will argue forthwith that there is something special indeed about this genre in relation to Deleuze’s thought. In short, it is in its resonances with comic books that Deleuze’s philosophy most vividly shows itself to be a form of literature. Finally, and of particular importance for this special edition of *Transnational Literature*, my analyses will reveal distinct philosophical (super)powers of concept-creation in the forms of superhero comics themselves (which Deleuze may have unconsciously harnessed in the development of his own concepts).

The first section of this essay, using the recently-published first textbook for comic studies (entitled *The Power of Comics: History, Form, Culture*), will begin with a brief description of the essential points of both the form of the comic book (or graphic novel) in general, and also the singular content of the superhero genre in particular. I will suggest that the central formal concepts of relevance to Deleuze’s work are the panel, the gutter and closure; and that the central content-ful concepts are myth, powers, masks and states of grace. The second section of this essay will then explore what Deleuze would term ‘resonances’ among each of the above-mentioned (formal and content-ful) concepts in Deleuze’s thinking, and more specifically from his second ‘independent’ book, *The Logic of Sense*. The concepts pertaining to comics form will include series, the Stoic image, and the empty space/occupant without a place. The concepts pertaining to superhero content will include event, incorporeal effects, phantasms, ideal games, the heroic Hercules (with his staff and cloak) and the thunderbolt. Additionally, one could export these concept inherent in comic books to non-comic analogues in the world. For example, one

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could analyze the invisibility of social injustice to entitled members of society as resulting from the migration of those truths to the ‘gutter’ of our society/cultural imagination.

Before I begin, however, a quick word about methodology. Most English-language Deleuze scholars have, arguably, thus far have tended to neglect the humor, playfulness and irreverence that pervade his work and are manifested in his recorded interviews. And given that, for three of many possible examples, (a) Deleuze’s philosophical heroes were Spinoza the heretic and the irrepressibly-funny Nietzsche, (b) Deleuze wrote a book connecting the Stoics to Lewis Carroll’s ‘Alice in Wonderland,’ and (c) Deleuze once compared his own philosophy to surfing, this neglect strikes me particularly problematic. In an attempt to revive this spirit of irreverent playfulness, then, my method in this essay is inspired by Deleuze’s concept, from Difference and Repetition, of the ‘dark precursor’ that causes two separate ‘series’ to ‘resonate’ together, his (non-)image for which is the invisible connection that races from the ground to the cloud immediately before the lightning bolt returns along that path down from the cloud to the ground.

In other words, I am trying in this essay to apply Deleuze’s own playful method on his own work, to – in his terms – create a dark precursor of my own, in order to establish resonances between the series of Deleuze’s text and the series of comic books and the secondary literature on them. This is also one of the reasons that I approach these texts in the form of a sequential, literary ‘reading.’ Ultimately, of course, if the reader is willing to try this experiment of reading Deleuze – who describe his own readings of philosophers, problematically, as ‘buggering’ them in order to cause them to give birth to ‘monsters’ – in a Deleuzian fashion (albeit, I hope, less problematically), I would ask that s/he evaluate the results of this experiment according to whether or not, by the end, s/he sees a new lightning bolt about to strike the ground, or perhaps at least feels the tingling sensation of its immanent arrival. And if it does flash, the credit must go in part to the distinctive powers of comics to philosophise with lightness and humor (along with related media such as fantasy role-playing games, and time travel science fiction films).

I. Superheroes’ Comic Forms and Content
The first relevant point in Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith’s The Power of Comics is that comic books constitute their own unique artform, which is a sub-category of the category of sequential art, the latter of which is distinguished from other forms of visual art by focusing on story-telling. Aside from the obvious example of comic books, other members of this sub-category, according to the authors, include ‘cave paintings, Grecian urns, tapestries, stained glass windows’ and more. Each is said to involve, as its basic unit of storytelling, the panel, defined

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4 For one important interview, see L’abécédiare de Gilles Deleuze. And for several examples of what Nietzsche would call “the spirit of gravity” in Deleuze scholarship, see Deleuze: The Difference Engineer, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (New York: Routledge, 1997).
5 For more on this concept, see Gilles Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 119.
6 For more on time travel cinema in connection to philosophy, and Deleuze’s philosophy in particular, see Joshua M. Hall, “Time-Travel-Image: Gilles Deleuze on Science Fiction Film,” Journal of Aesthetic Education (forthcoming).
as ‘a discernible area that contains a moment of the story.’ And this means that the panel is an essentially fluid and variable unit, given that the size, shape, contents, and interrelationships of panels in the artforms enumerated above vary considerably. A panel could also be said to correspond to the single frame of the cinema, which is the basic unit that Deleuze begins with in his analyses in Cinema 1: The Movement-Image.9

Moreover, in terms of comic books’ philosophical powers, the phenomenon of the panel enables them to resist the tendency, in exclusively written-language philosophy, of visually homogenizing each concept into an apparent isomorphism of structure and importance. Instead, comics can dramatise individual concepts, their relationships, and their ecologies (using the different sizes, shapes and interrelationships of the frames). Put briefly, comics, properly utilised, could facilitate more heterogeneous concept geography, thus mirroring the unavoidably heterogeneous varieties of our worlds.

Having elaborated the characteristics of the genus to which comic books belong, Duncan and Smith are then prepared to give the comic book its classical genus-differentia definition: ‘a volume in which all aspects of the narrative are represented by pictorial and linguistic images encapsulated in a sequence of juxtaposed panels and pages.’10 Notice here that the basic ontological unit is the image, which is the same unit that Bergson deploys in Matter and Memory, inspiring Deleuze to do the same in Cinema 1 and Cinema 2. Furthermore, the image is characterised as being both visible and legible, which characteristic Bergson and Deleuze also attribute to the image. Narrative, in turn, Duncan and Smith then define as ‘an account of an event or a series of events.’11 Here, then, one finds one of the central concepts in the whole of Deleuze’s philosophy – the event – and of singular importance, as I will show below, in The Logic of Sense.

Zooming back out to the level of comics’ powers in general, these imagistic and evental qualities facilitate comics’ illumination of temporality, historicity, change and process – which could be especially useful in philosophizing about phenomena in which these characteristics are essential (such as the rise of a political movement, or the diminishing respect afforded to a given scientific model in the wake of massive technological changes).

Returning to Duncan and Smith, they also observe that these narratives at the base of the comic book are actually re-spliced narratives taken from the medium of the newspaper comic strips – one might say differential repetitions of that other medium. There are important differences that emerge in this borrowing, however, including a different method of ‘encapsulation,’ defined as ‘the selection of key moments in action.’12 More specifically, ‘though there might be sharing of vocabulary, each is a medium with its own language.’13 Paraphrased slightly, the claim appears to be that there is a shared semantics, but a different syntax.

Having defined the comic book initially in reference to the genre of sequential art in general, and having further clarified the issue by reference to the sister species of comic strips, Duncan

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8 Comics 3.
10 Comics 4.
11 Comics 4.
12 Comics 5.
13 Comics 6.
and Smith make a second beginning to the task, this time borrowing the rhetoric of information theory. ‘Comic books,’ they now claim, ‘are acts of communication.’\textsuperscript{14} This emphasis on activity and on communication also resonates strongly with Deleuze’s emphasis on action and communication. As acts of communication, comic books can be understood as being composed of various ‘sources’ including writers and artists, ‘gatekeepers’ including editors and corporations, ‘encoded messages’ including story and encapsulation, ‘delivery’ including distributors and retail stores, and ‘decoded messages’ including the cognitive and affective reactions of the comic book readers.\textsuperscript{15} Importantly for its connection to Deleuze, then, comic book theory is going to involve economic and political analyses as well as formal ones. Such political and economic analyses are also necessary, therefore, in thinking through the process by which comic creators’ philosophical work may be inflected, distorted, and actively suppressed, between the artist’s drawing board and the comic book retailers’ shelves.

Zooming in on the level of encoded messages, and more specifically the final level of encapsulation, called ‘composing,’ one finds more of the formal properties unique to the medium of comic books. Duncan and Smith begin by comparing-contrasting this phenomenon in comics and in the theater/cinema, thereby buttressing the connection between comic books and Deleuze-via-film. ‘Most of the mise-en-scéne elements present on stage or screen –,’ they explain, ‘color, lighting, distance, angle, movement, setting, and décor – can be depicted in a comic book panel.’\textsuperscript{16} Even more interesting, though, and in support of my Deleuze-comics linkage, are the following four elements of composition, unique to the comic book medium:

First, variations in the shape of the frame can affect the meaning of what is framed. Second, the expressive potential of lines means that the brush strokes with which a picture is inked can create affective and/or cognitive reactions to an image. Third, any sound that is introduced into a comic book story has to visual and is therefore an element of composition. Fourth, comic books must effectively blend words and pictures.\textsuperscript{17}

I will now attempt to elaborate the superiorities of comic books to the cinema that these four factors suggest in terms of serving as a vehicle and creative force – not just for Deleuze’s philosophy – but also for any original philosophical content of its own, as endowed by its human creators.

First, the comic book panel is much more flexible and variable than the screen onto which the film image is projected, thus allowing it to express and produce much more difference than its cinematic counterpart. Second, the use of human brushstrokes (as opposed to the photographic perfection of the camera) also allows for much greater diversity and multiplicity of images. Third, the collapsing of sound into visual images aligns better with Deleuze’s monism in particular than non-silent films (as perhaps indicated by the awkward and parenthetical place of sound in the Cinema volumes). And fourth, the word/picture blending goes even farther than the imagery of cinema to dethrone verbal language from its fascistic position vis-à-vis other forms

\textsuperscript{14} Comics 7.
\textsuperscript{15} Comics 7.
\textsuperscript{16} Comics 10.
\textsuperscript{17} Comics 10.
of language, expression and communication. This final point is perhaps of the greatest philosophical significance (of the four), since a perennial problem in Western philosophy has been how to accurately depict (and positively impact) a meta-verbal world using exclusively verbal language. Put positively, comic books are able to generate philosophical concepts which – like the world to which they refer – are a blend of the verbal and the visual.

Zooming back out to the model of information-theory, and then zooming in to the ‘decoded message’ level, one finds another major resonance with Deleuze’s work. ‘The receiver [i.e., reader] performs closure between the encapsulated moments in order to create a completed whole out of fragments,’ This is perhaps the most important superiority of comic books to film as Deleuzian artform. Instead of the camera combining the frames into one overarching, uniform, and apparently seamless whole, the eye of each reader does this, in an infinite number of different ways for different eyes/readers, at the level of the virtual. No two repetitions of the comic book reading experience are identical, and there are only open-ended wholes, imaginatively constructed. This also suggests another philosophical power of the comic book medium, namely to preserve the idiosyncrasies of the philosopher against standardization, specifically by multiplying the original idiosyncrasies in the mind of each reader who performs this philosophical closure.

My next analyses will focus primarily on a separate chapter in The Power of Comics devoted to the superhero genre in particular, but I begin with two significant moments from an earlier chapter, entitled ‘Creating the Story.’ There, Duncan and Smith borrow the concept of ‘proliferating narrative’ from literary theorist Marie-Laure Ryan to describe the most common type of narrative for comic books. This is in contrast to (a) ‘simple narrative,’ in which there is one event enacted and resolved; (b) ‘complex narrative’ which includes ‘backstory, character development, and ongoing subplots’; (c) ‘antinarrative,’ in which ‘narrative elements’ ‘do not fit together to form a comprehensible story’; and (d) ‘braided narrativity,’ as found in, for example, a typical soap opera. Quoting Ryan, the authors explain that in this latter type of narrative, ‘the main plot functions mostly as support for the telling of adventures and anecdotes (Ryan 373).’

Duncan and Smith describe this ‘braided narrativity’ as, ‘not so much a story as it is a mythos.’ And this emphasis on proliferation, and the implication that the story is always in the middle, reminds one of Deleuze’s concept of the rhizome from A Thousand Plateaus. Secondly, this ‘Creating the Story’ chapter introduces, for the first time, comic creator Neil Gaiman’s concept of the ‘state of grace,’ which Duncan and Smith describe as ‘a set of powers, appearance, supporting characters, and behaviors that are preserved in a recognizable form for the economic interests of the corporation that owns the character,’ which phrase can also be found in Deleuze’s Logic of the Sense. Note, from Duncan and Smith’s articulation, the emphasis on power, appearance, behavior-qua-separate-from-individuals, and economics – all four of which are critical for Deleuze’s thought.

18 Comics 12, emphasis original.
19 Comics 129.
20 Comics 130.
21 Comics 130.
22 See, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), 3-25.
23 Comics 131.
I turn now to the chapter of *The Power of Comics* entitled ‘Comic Book Genres: The Superhero Genre.’ It begins by noting the distinctly mythic-American source of the superhero: ‘Even the superhero’s penchant for individual initiative, and “regeneration through violence” has always been engrained in the American mythos (Mark Nevins, 27; Early 71).’ At the level of direct (as opposed to symbolic) causation, Duncan and Smith reference scholar Peter Coogan’s claim that ‘the earliest comic book superheroes were derived from three primary streams of adventure-narrative figures: the science-fiction superman, the pulp magazine übermensch, and the dual-identity vigilante.’ Science fiction has long been a predominantly U.S. genre, the pulp magazine is an entirely U.S. invention, and the dual-identity vigilante too has arguably achieved its peak popularity here (in figures like the Lone Ranger and the Shadow).

Turning to specific and famous superheroes, Duncan and Smith claim that Superman, for one, ‘is the culmination of all three [of these] traditions,’ and Batman, for another, ‘looks to have been inspired by a number of pulp magazine adventure-heroes.’

The next section of this superhero chapter is further divided into subsections devoted to the following four conventions of the superhero genre: ‘character types, themes, narrative patterns, and visual conventions.’ I will now consider each of these subsections in turn. In the first, under ‘character types,’ Duncan and Smith define three ‘key elements,’ namely, ‘mission, powers, and identity.’ They define powers as ‘fantastic abilities or skills far superior to those of ordinary humans.’

Part of the appeal of superheroes, and one of the reasons they have always worked better on printed paper than in any other medium, is that many of the powers, such as shooting energy beams from their eyes or lightning bolts from their fingertips, make for an exciting visual display on the page.

To relate this back to Deleuze, note first that the emphasis is on the appearance, or superficial indicators, of the hero’s powers, more so than on the powers themselves. Second, the lightning bolt is a recurring and central image throughout Deleuze’s writings.

In the second subsection, which deals with superhero ‘themes,’ and begins by noting that ‘What makes these protagonists heroic is not their power, but their persistence,’ as the superhero ‘is often the underdog’ and is ‘often beaten in the first encounter with a supervillain,’ and yet, finally, ‘always return to the fray.’ Also in sympathy with the creator of the nomadic war-

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24 *Comics* 222.
25 *Comics* 222.
26 *Comics* 223, 224.
27 *Comics* 226.
28 *Comics* 226.
29 *Comics* 227.
30 *Comics* 227.
32 *Comics* 227.
machine (which itself, incidentally, sounds like a character of trope from a superhero comic book), superheroes ‘teach the lesson that justice is more important than law,’ and are thereby ‘essentially outlaws.’

Third, the ‘narrative patterns’ subsection returns to the image of the lightning flash by nothing that ‘superpowers are often acquired in a flash of lightning.’ Thus, it is not just the stylised representation of the superhero’s powers (such as a lightning flash to represent an energy beam) but also the originary transformation of the superhero that partakes of an evental quality. This subsection also returns to Gaiman’s ‘state of grace’ concept, noting that it is also deployed by comics theorist Mark Singer. Duncan and Smith’s example in this instance, using the example of the Marvel superhero called ‘Hulk’, is ‘Hulkness’ – a huge green guy in purple pants who gets stronger as he becomes angry. A reader of Deleuze might be reminded here of the infinitive form of the event, the most frequent example of which in Deleuze, ironically, is ‘to green.’ One could generalise this point for comics’ philosophical powers in general by saying that comics can ‘infinitise’ concepts more naturally and easily than traditional philosophical media (like journal articles). That is, comics can take concepts to their logical extremes by stripping them more completely of their associations with specific individuals (and the latters’ identity conditions).

And the fourth subsection, on ‘visual conventions,’ begins by noting the two foundational conventions, namely ‘detailed musculature’ and ‘dynamic movement.’ The first is linked to the obvious eroticism of the superhero genre, with ‘skintight spandex stretched over impossibly muscled and improbably proportioned bodies.’ Monstrosity, dynamism and the pervasiveness of the sexual are of course all three ‘conventions’ of Deleuze’s philosophy as well.

This superhero chapter then concludes with the following apology for the superhero, which will also serve as a fitting transition to the work of Deleuze, as a kind of superhero of late twentieth-century continental philosophy: ‘Superhero tales are not so much a fulfillment of a wish for power as they are an optimistic statement about the future and an act of defiance in the face of adversity.’

II. Deleuze’s Super-heroics

Before getting to the actual content of The Logic of Sense, one encounters a Deleuzian ‘resonance’ already in the formal structure of the book, in that it is divided into ‘series’ instead of chapters, and comic books are of course a serial artform. James Williams, in his monograph on Logic of Sense (hereafter LS) argues that this label is of the utmost importance. ‘Though the series follow on from one another in some key ways, and though in some sense the series are all connected, they also operate independently of the order they are presented in.’ This is also true,
of course, for comic books, since the numerical ordering of their issues does not preclude (either in theory or practice) a reader from starting right in the middle. One is also reminded in this passage of The Power of Comics’ theory of proliferating narrativity.

Turning to the actual content LS, the first formal resonance one encounters there appears as early as the first page of the Preface. It has do with one of the two primary sources for the book, namely Stoic philosophy (the other primary source being the work of Lewis Carroll), and more specifically that the exceptional contribution from this school of philosophy can be encapsulated in an image. ‘The privileged place assigned to the Stoics is due to their having been the initiators of a new image of the philosopher which broke away from the pre-Socratics, Socratic philosophy, and Platonism’ (xiii-xiv). Now, obviously the Stoic philosophers produced philosophy, and philosophy is produced primarily in written language. Therefore, the nature of one of the two primary inspirations for Deleuze’s book coincides with the formal uniqueness of comic books – namely the interdependency or interpenetration of words and images (one might add at the same ontological and/or discursive level). In other words, both (Deleuze’s version of) the Stoics and comic books in general achieve their art by combining linguistic and pictorial images. Moreover, Deleuze closes his Preface by going so far as to describe LS as an ‘attempt’ at a kind of ‘novel’ composed of various ‘figures,’ and a functional synonym for the comic book is the graphic novel, which also tells its story with recourse to various kinds of figures (including superheroes) (xiv).

LS’s first series, entitled ‘of Paradoxes of Pure Becoming,’ opens by establishing Deleuze’s concern with the event, and I have already observed the centrality of the event in the form of the comic book (1). The second series, ‘of Surface Effects,’ introduces an emphasis on the surface as the locus or topos of the event, which resonates with the essentially two-dimensional form of the comic book (6). Deleuze elaborates on these surface events in terms of surface-effects, and notes that they are ‘effects in the causal sense, but also sonorous, optical, or linguistic “effects,”’ and comic book surfaces, too, can be analyzed into representations of visual, auditory and linguistic phenomena (typically represented by images, onomatopoeia, and word/thought balloons, respectively) (7). Moreover, this surface-emphasis recurs throughout LS, particularly in the seventeenth series, where he claims (a) that the surface ‘is the product of the actions and passions of the body (like a comic book surface produced by the actions of both “external” creator-bodies and “internal” fiction-bodies); (b) that ‘a surface energy, without even being of the surface, is due to every surface formation; and from it a fictitious surface tension arises as a force exerting itself on the plane of the surface’; and finally, (c) that ‘[s]ense is that which is deployed at the surface’ (124-125).

This second series in LS also introduces the important connection between the surface-event and humor, which evokes the etymological basis of the ‘comic’ book, so called because of its origin in political satire cartoons, and on a broader level, the predominantly silly, happy, positive content and narrative structure of most comic books. ‘Humor,’ Deleuze writes, ‘is the art of the surface’ (9). In this connection, he also references the near two-dimensionality of the famous ‘card figures’ from Carroll’s Alice stories, and one could fairly describe all comic book characters as (physically/metaphysically) of necessity card figures (9). Finally from this series, Deleuze invokes ‘the strip,’ reminiscent of the comic strip (from which the comic book, at least
in one sense, derives) (although Deleuze had in mind, instead, the Möbius strip, i.e. a continuous surface that has only one side, since he invokes it explicitly later in LS).\textsuperscript{41}

Finally, in the eighth series, ‘of Structure,’ Deleuze returns to an earlier line of thinking, wherein there is a strange object or paradoxical element or ‘differentiator,’ which is simultaneously (on one series) ‘an extremely mobile empty space’ and (on a second series) ‘a rapidly moving object, an occupant without a place, always supernumerary and displaced’ (41). And this eighth series concludes with the claim that ‘there is no structure without the empty square, which makes everything function’ (51). I would suggest that the empty square is like what is termed in comic books the ‘gutter,’ or the white space between and around individual panels. And the nomadic occupant is like each panel itself, always moving on, always in a sense restless against the disjointed background of the gutter/empty white page. The first series would be constituted of all the blank white pages and gutters, and the second series would be constituted by the totality of the panels.

If the reader finds the number of resonances between LS and comic book form in the preceding subsection underwhelming, I expect that the plenitude of examples regarding LS and the superhero genre (which has nevertheless many important connections to form, largely because the superhero genre has been far and away the most popular) will be reassuring, and perhaps even overpowering. I begin again with part of the extra-textual structure of LS (in this case a definition of one of the words from the book’s title), before returning to the beginning of LS in order to proceed with a kind of differential repetition of my previous section (of comic book form).

Regarding the title of LS, James Williams’ critical guide offers a definition of the concept ‘sense’ as ‘the alteration in the intensity of relations of series of infinitives’ and then offers the example of ‘He is green’ alters the relation of ‘to green’, ‘to blunder’ and ‘to excuse’ when state about a particular new recruit.\textsuperscript{42} Similarly, one could understand the sense or expression of the comic book – in its (dominant) superhero incarnation – as alternation in the intensities of relations of series of infinitives of superpowers such as ‘to fly,’ ‘to become invisible,’ ‘to become super-strong’ and ‘to read another’s thoughts,’ as dramatised by the conflicts among beings (such as ‘Superman,’ ‘Invisible Woman,’ ‘the Hulk,’ and ‘Professor X,’ respectively), who have been constituted as singular by being the sites of those infinitives. To put it in Deluezian terminology, the superhero comic book is a kind of ‘plane of immanence’ on which are deployed a variety of events or ‘lines of flight’ defined as pure differences.

The first superhero content resonance that one encounters in the text of LS itself is found on the first page of the Preface (as was also true, the reader might recall, with the first resonance with comic book form), and that resonance is that LS is a book about an author of speculative fiction (Lewis Carroll). (It seems to me that classifying superhero comic books as a subgenre of speculative fiction (Lewis Carroll). (It seems to me that classifying superhero comic books as a subgenre of speculative fiction is uncontroversial, given that fantasy and science fiction are already acknowledges subgenres, and it is from them that superhero narratives of comic books draw most extensively for their material).

In LS’s first ‘series,’ Deleuze emphasises how, in Lewis Carroll’s fiction, the character ‘Alice’ becomes both larger and smaller at the same time; and this ability to change size is a

\textsuperscript{41} Comics 123.
\textsuperscript{42} Williams 50.
frequent superpower in superhero comics (as for example with the Hulk, who gets much larger when he transforms from Bruce Banner, and Ant-man, who gets much smaller). Moreover, given Deleuze’s paradoxical observation that ‘it is at the same time that one becomes larger than one was and smaller than one becomes,’ it seems that it is, in a (non-Deleuzian) manner of speaking, the instant of becoming – the moment that transforms the normal body into the extraordinary – that Deleuze is isolating; and this is arguably the paradigmatic moment of the superhero (1).

Speaking of (secret) identities, moreover, Deleuze then goes on to talk about how Alice’s identity and her proper name are both disrupted, or come into question, as a result of her transformative experiences. And the classic use of secret identities and alter egos seem like a classic case of this. All these reversals appear in infinite identity have one consequence: the contesting of Alice’s personal identity and the loss of her proper name (3). Infinite identity also seems a fitting turn of phrase for the identity of the kind of beings who inhabit a fictional world defined above by ‘proliferating narrativity’; that is, superheroes are those beings whose role in proliferating narratives grants them a kind of infinite identity. The take-home points from the first series, therefore, seems to be that (a) Carroll’s ‘Alice’ can be thought of as a kind of superhero, and, more importantly, (b) literal superheroes (such as ‘Spiderman’ could perhaps serve equally well (if not better) than Alice as examples/illuminations of Deleuze’s conception of identity.

LS’s second ‘series’ offers five distinctive new resonances between Deleuze and superheroes. First, its emphasis on incorporeal entities – ‘not physical qualities and properties, but rather logical or dialectical attributes’ – also finds a strong resonance in the world of superhero comic books, particularly (again) with regard to the superhero’s powers, whose sources, structure, techniques, applications, etc. are often of an incorporeal nature (4-5). Consider, for example, telepathic and telekinetic powers, which are a mainstay of the genre. Secondly, this series also introduces the concept of ‘extra-Being,’ which would be one appropriate way of talking about the being that is characteristic of superheroes in general (as compared with the being characteristic of ordinary human beings) (7). Thirdly, this second series valorises surface-ness or superficiality per se, which is in marked contrast to the stereotypical denouncing of the superficiality of comic books (7-11). In other words, perhaps the superficiality (in, perhaps, various senses of the word) of comic books is a resource that needs to be tapped into and explored for philosophical insight into Deleuze’s thought. Fourthly, and most important from this series for my purposes, the concept of ‘phantasm,’ of pivotal importance later in the book, is here introduced, specifically as more or less a synonym for ‘surface effects.’

The OED defines a phantasm as (1a) ‘illusion; deceptive appearance’; (1b) ‘a thing or being which apparently exists but is not real; a hallucination or vision; a figment of the imagination; an illusion’; (2a) ‘An apparition, spirit, or ghost; a visible but incorporeal being.’ All of these elements remind one of the comic book superhero as well. Fifth, and finally, this series speaks of the how the ‘most concealed becomes the most manifest’ in the form of ‘a new youthfulness – transmutation’ (8). This un-concealment could be related to the artificial means of making

43 There is an interesting analysis of how issues of identity intersect with moral and legal judgments, in an essay called “Questions of Identity: Is the Hulk the Same Person as Bruce Banner?” by Kevin Kinghorn, in the anthology Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way, ed. Tom Morris and Matt Morris (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 223-236.
manifest invisible powers (such as telepathy represented by colored lines emanating from a telepath’s forehead) or to the superhero identity emerging from the hiddenness of her secret identity. And the youthfulness of transmutation seems particularly apt for one of the most popular superhero comics in U.S. history, namely the ‘X-men,’ a group of (initially) teenagers defending human society by utilizing special powers granted them by various genetic mutations.

LS’s fifteenth series, like its second series, is a veritable powerhouse of superhero resonances, and thus also deserves extended attention here. First, Deleuze claims that ‘the battle’ is ‘the Event in its essence,’ and near-perpetual combat has always constituted the heart of the superhero genre (100). Second, he writes of that which ‘leaps from one singularity to another,’ which reminds one of the many superheroes (such as ‘Spider-Man’) for whom leaping is an essential trait/power (107). Third, he defines ‘this new discourse’ of events and singularities as dealing with (in contrast to ‘the form’ and ‘the formless’) ‘the pure unformed’ which might remind the reader again of the colorful representations of energy-discharge powers (107). This connection is buttressed by the following sentence, which refers back to Nietzsche’s thought on monstrosity, followed a few sentences later by a reference to the Nietzsche’s ‘Over-man’ or, more accurately, super-person.

LS’s sixteenth series is similarly rich in resonances, beginning with the idea that singularities (like superpowers) create individuals (like superheroes), in that they ‘preside over the constitution of individuals (111). Second, multiple worlds (like multiple superhero series, one or more for each popular hero/team) ‘appear as instances of solution for one and the same problem’ (and in the superhero case, this problem is almost always how to save the world from supervillains) (114). In this vein, there have been instances in the superhero genre of multiple superheroes like the ‘vague Adam,” that is, a vagabond, an Adam = x common to several worlds,’ (the most famous instance being DC’s Crisis on Infinite Earths series, in which each Earth has its own Superman) (114). Finally, superheroes are defined by their powers as ‘predicates which define persons synthetically, and open different worlds and individualities to them as so many variables or possibilities,’ which is reminiscent of Gaiman’s abovementioned concept of the superhero’s ‘state of grace’ (115).

The importance of the eighteenth series is similar, although in its case primarily due to one idea/image, and that is ‘the hero of Seneca’s tragedies and of the entire Stoic thought,’ namely Hercules (131). Hercules, with his superhuman powers, his quasi-divine origin, and his elaborate missions, is arguably the paradigmatic proto-superhero. According to Deleuze, Hercules fights monsters both ‘[i]nside the depths’ and ‘in the sky,’ which are common tropes in superhero narratives (131-132). Moreover, Deleuze considers Hercules’ traditional accoutrements, ‘his club and lion skin’ as analogues to the ‘staff and mantle’ or ‘reversible cloak’ of the Stoics, and as necessary complements to the Stoic image of the philosopher alluded to in his Preface (133). There has been more than one superhero that wore lion skins and carried clubs, and quite a few who brandish a cloak and staff, so these additional aspects of the Stoic image could be understood to strengthen its resonance with the comic book superhero.

The twenty-first series deals with ‘becoming a citizen of the world,’ which seems to be the ultimate aspiration/achievement of almost all of the most popular superheroes (148). (Also interestingly in this context, in a recent issue of Superman, the titular character renounces his
U.S. citizenship). Moreover, this cosmopolitanism for Deleuze is accomplished by trying ‘not to be unworthy of what happens to us,’ which is the paradigmatic challenge in the origin story of the superhero, epitomised in Stan Lee’s dictum (from his Spider-Man comic) that ‘With great power comes great responsibility.’ Also significant from the twenty-first series is Deleuze’s characterization of ‘the actor’ as an ‘anti-god,’ which would make an oft-appropriate descriptor of various vigilante superheroes (150). Finally in this vein, Deleuze’s description of the (temporal) present of the actor as ‘the most narrow, the most contracted, the most instantaneous, and the most punctual’ hearkens back to Umberto Eco’s criticism of the comic book superhero Superman as existing in a temporality which in-authentically denies the reality of human being-toward-death.

The most important work done by the thirtieth series, finally, is to introduce and valorise one of the (retrospectively) most important concepts of the entire book, and one which offers perhaps the most direct justification for my entire superhero-based reinterpretation of LS, namely the ‘phantasm’ (210). The three characteristics of the phantasm, according to Deleuze, are that it is (1) ‘pure event,’ and I have repeatedly shown the centrality of the event for superhero narratives; (2) it ‘is the movement whereby the ego opens itself up to the surface and liberates the a-cosmic, impersonal, and pre-individual singularities which it had imprisoned,’ and this could appropriately describe the transformation of both person-to-superhero and outsider-to-reader; and (3) it ‘represents the event according to its essence, that is, as a noematic attribute,’ much in the same way that superhero comics could be understood as foregrounding superpowers (relative to every other aspect of the narrative/world) (210, 212, 214).

III. Conclusion: Deleuzian Philosophy as Comic Book Literature, or Comics as Philosophy
The primary benefit of the preceding analyses vis-à-vis Deleuze are that they suggest a concrete, accessible and wildly popular new medium through which to approach his singularly difficult thought. And the primary benefit from these analyses vis-à-vis comic books is that they illuminate comic books’ power, complexity, and status as both a mature subgenre of literary art, and also a productive site of philosophical expression. Consequently, the superhero genre is not merely a kind of infancy or backwardness for the comic book medium, but instead constitutes content that is naturally appropriate for that medium’s forms, and perhaps even takes those forms to their highest philosophical development, thereby offering itself to serious philosophers as a uniquely powerful medium for creating new philosophical concepts.

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44 For more, see the following New York Times blog: http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/29/superman-renounces-his-u-s-citizenship/

45 Spoken by the narrator in the comic in which the character of Spider-Man debuted, namely Amazing Fantasy (15), (August, 1962).

and social justice includes a chapbook collection and 58 poems in literary journals such as *Xavier Review*, 20 years’ experience as a dancer/choreographer, and consulting for Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jose Antonio Vargas’ upcoming MTV documentary on race in the United States.
The Gift

Robert Lumsden

He woke to these words:

‘The gift has been given’.

But the day doesn’t stop for voices. He had things to do, a living to make. This was just something else to be ignored. He was good at ignoring things.

Taking his lunch through the old market to the dockside, he readied himself to call the voice to account should it interrupt him again. It had seemed to carry an undisclosed instruction. Fine. But what? And what was he supposed to do about it?

The boy when Ricco first saw him was standing looking out over the water in a classic attitude of loss, very still, hands at his sides, gazing a little downwards.

‘My ball’, he said, pointing towards the harbour.

Ricco was on the point of saying there were plenty of other balls in the world, but he didn’t believe it. There was no ball like the ball you’d just lost. That was the one you really wanted. As he watched, the boy made a fist and rubbed an eye with the back of his hand – a profile of loss transformed into an icon of grief.

‘You’ll get it back’, Ricco said.

The boy doubted.

‘Trust me’.

What was he saying? He didn’t believe his own assurance – so why offer it?

The second encounter came after work, while he was waiting for his bus.

A homeless person, a middle-aged woman, passed him, then stopped a few yards on and retraced her steps, placing herself carefully to one side of the head of the queue so she could see him. Ricco was sure she was looking at him though she was careful not to be caught. He hadn’t seen her ask for money.

His bus came and went. The woman still seemed to be watching him.

‘Are you OK?’

‘Do I look OK to you?’

‘Anything I can do?’

‘I appreciate your concern. Money would be nice’.

So she had put her hand out, after all. That was disappointing.

‘You and just about everyone else in town, lady’.

He took the next bus with a sense of having done his duty by showing an interest. We’re bound, aren’t we, to try to make the world a better place? He couldn’t say he felt any better for it, though.

As if he didn’t have enough to deal with, he began to feel a little feverish, and reached into his trouser pocket for a handkerchief. He pulled out his wallet with the handkerchief, lay it on the seat beside him, then on his lap, feeling the weight of it, warm leather, warmed by him, Ricco. Returned to his pocket, it made an unattractive bulk on his thigh. So sometimes he resented his image as he moved past it reflected back from a shop window, the way things you carried with you made you look uglier than you sometimes felt – though you’d have to be crazy to resent money, wouldn’t you? Who was that insane? For the bag lady, money was life and hope she didn’t have enough of either.
Half of what he was carrying, right now, would set her up for a week. Food and shelter and a few luxuries besides. But he wasn’t about to hand over any cash. There are too many bag ladies. It’s depressing to think of them. So he stopped thinking of them.

Sherie was out of bed when he got home, slumped in a chair and staring into the fire. Ricco knew there wasn’t any point asking what sort of day she’d had, nor in trying to tell her about his. So he busied himself unpacking groceries onto the dining room table, making a little more noise than he needed to. He’d found that a certain, measured, level of activity gave her some relief in a way he couldn’t fathom. He wasn’t about to ask questions. You take what you can get.

He dropped a few more cans onto the table and rustled some packages. Then he went into the kitchen to fix dinner.

Sherie had no control over her illness, though people found that hard to accept. Sometimes friends would tell her to get out and about more, as if getting rid of her trouble were no tougher than putting out garbage.

Whatever it was that had a hold on her, resistance was out of the question. They both knew that very well, having thrown everything at it they could think of and anything anyone suggested. Nothing worked. Neither ancient regimen nor the most recent strategies of training yourself to live on reasonable terms with the unacceptable, long walks beside the sea, holidays in foreign parts, strange diets and dietary supplements, warm salt baths, the kindness of concerned strangers – nothing touched it.

He imagined some animal substance like the stuff mediums cough up during séances, an octopus-like thickened mist sucked back into his wife when she tried to breathe, closing around her heart.

Doctors? Some of the drugs they tried worked for a while, or worked sometimes, or didn’t work at all when once they had, so new drugs had to be risked or the strength of the old drugs increased. Their most recent adventure in shock treatment had made Sherie much worse. He wondered whether it hadn’t pushed her permanently over the edge.

In the early days of the illness, he’d prayed often, but God seemed to be snoozing. Now Ricco rarely prayed at all, not even under his breath. God had had his chances.

Recently, though, the idea had begun to take hold that something might be possible – that something could be done for his wife after all – and that he was the man to do it. He tried not to feel that, because it was disturbing, but he couldn’t shake the feeling. Eventually it took on the strength of a conviction.

Standing between her and the fire, he said:
‘Honey, listen. You don’t have to feel bad any more’.
She moved to pull away, but couldn’t.
‘You know what I’m saying? You believe this?’
His wife looked at him directly and did an astonishing thing. She nodded – he thought she had, anyway.
‘Alright. Listen. When you wake up tomorrow ... ‘
But she was wandering again, so Ricco went down on one knee and took both her hands.
‘Listen to me, Sherie’.
He willed her to look at him. When she did, her eyes were cloudy, as though she were trying to remember who he was.
‘This is the way it’s going to be. Tomorrow – are you listening? - tomorrow when you wake up, you’ll be feeling better than you have for a long, long time. As good as you’ve ever felt. OK?’

She seemed to be listening.
‘That’s the way it’s going to be. OK?’

He moved away and she resumed her blank staring into the fire.

Ricco was so upset with himself he couldn’t touch his dinner – didn’t even want to see it. He left Sherie as soon as he could and climbed the stairs to his bed. What was happening to him that he could make such a stupid, ruthless, promise?

2

Next morning the events of the previous day started crowding him as soon as he woke – the boy, the homeless person, his wife, what he’d said. He kept seeing Sherie’s face, as he dressed.

She was still sleeping, he’d thought, as he edged towards the door, but she turned towards him just as he reached it. She was asking about breakfast. Speaking to him.

He managed to ask for details.
‘The works. Bacon, eggs, sausage, tomatoes. Do we have tomatoes? I think there’s some in the freezer. At the back’.

Astonishing! – that she’d been registering what was happening around her in such detail when she seemed not to know what day of the week it was.

She spread her arms wide.
‘I want everything’.

As he was standing at the cooker she came up from behind and hugged him.
‘You know, I’ve been thinking I’d kind of like to get back to work’.

‘Sounds good’.

‘Maybe I could pick up something at the store. Casual. Put my toe in the water. You know?’

She meant the three block shrine to merchandising from which she’d often returned pale and trembling, to which she woke some mornings distressed to the point of tears.

‘Sure’.

‘Only I get bored at home’.

‘That’s understandable. Hanging about, time on your hands. Who wouldn’t get bored. I’ve found that’.

Wondering if he’d gone too far. But it was alright.
‘Bored? You? You wouldn’t allow it’.
‘What I meant was, I can imagine’.

As she pushed back from the table, he ventured:
‘You’re looking a lot better’.

‘I feel better.’ leaning across, laying a hand on his arm. ‘I feel great.’

He left for work as soon as he could, hurried by this thing he couldn’t understand, stopping at his bank on the way. They were never hard to deal with and he hadn’t anticipated difficulties, but the teller frowned at the withdrawal slip as though it had personally offended her.

‘You’ll be overdrawn’, she said. ‘I’m afraid this will have to go the manager.’
It was inexplicable. He kept track of how much he had in that particular account, the one he used for day to day expenses, a habit he’d inherited from his father who’d been raised dirt poor and only late in life managed to find ways to persuade money to stick.

It can’t be, he told the clerk, a woman he’d dealt with many times. Somebody’s made a mistake. But she was unmoveable.

She turned the screen of her computer towards him and showed him details of the most recent withdrawal.

‘I’ll take care of it later,’ Ricco said.

He made an appointment with the manager for the following morning. Even if there were fraud involved, the bank would have a mechanism in place to deal with it. Ricco wasn’t going to let something like that trouble him. He was careful never to allow himself to become disturbed by events he couldn’t control.

‘Look’, the boy said. He was holding a beach ball in both hands, half offering it. The ball was still damp in patches and a piece of dried seaweed was stuck to its side. Ricco had imagined a baseball when he’d been talking to the boy previously, or a rubber ball of about that size. But it was much larger than he’d pictured it, a beach ball, brightly coloured.

‘Your daddy got you a new one?’
‘No.’ Indignation. ‘It came back.’
‘That’s good. That’s real nice.’
His heart was hammering.
‘There when you got home, eh?’
The boy nodded.

As he walked away Ricco managed to throw fine, fine, over his shoulder.

He’d started feeling leaden as he left the house that morning and by the time he made for the bus stop at day’s end it felt as though he were walking with weights tied to his ankles. He seemed to have no energy when he needed some in a hurry – at a pedestrian crossing, or having to side-step some clumsy movement in a crowd. This must have been the way Sherie was when she was unwell, the preliminaries of it. He wasn’t fooling himself that he bore, not yet, the full, crushing weight his wife hauled about, leaving her just enough life to keep ticking over.

Even at this early stage everything basic to the way his body worked seemed to be changing. But disaster isn’t always instantaneously unkind. Heartbeat? Sure thing, be our guest. Take as many of those as you need to keep your suffering in full sight of the misery knowledge of it brings. Walk on, as you wish, only more slowly, with more parody of incremental effort dogging each step than you’d have imagined possible.

Approaching the stop, he thought of the homeless lady with dull horror, hoping she wouldn’t be there. But she was.

She stood unnaturally close, not speaking. Then she said:
‘Money came.’

Something fell and jolted. He felt old, and tired.
‘Hey! Great! How about that?’
‘I kept this account open. I don’t know why. Foolishness. Anyway, money came.’
Ricco looked along the road, invoking the bus.
The bag lady was staring at him.
‘Out of the blue. Just like that.’
He had to ask.
‘How much?’
She was about to tell him but he didn’t want to hear it, didn’t want her words sounding in that public place, so he stopped her and tore a sheet of paper from the diary he carried in his jacket.
He waited until he was three stops clear of her before looking at the paper to see what she’d written. Though he didn’t need to look, really, he felt bound to – what was it? – play his part? What he saw, as he’d expected, was the amount that had gone missing from his bank account. That amount, within a few dollars, exactly.
The heaviness was more imposing now. When he reached the stop nearest his house, he had to drag himself from his seat, then along his street, and up the steps to the apartment.
At least the bag lady hadn’t thanked him. He’d been spared that humiliation.

He returned to a house transformed. Every room had been cleaned top to bottom. All the lights had been switched on and surfaces shone like spun glass. The dining room table was set for half a dozen guests, and the smell of something delicious followed him from the kitchen as he went from room to room, imagining the movements his wife would have had to make, the decisions, adjustments, the energy it would have taken.

He couldn’t reconcile this busy brightness with the woman he’d left that morning ebbing nearer absolute inertia. But here she stood, before him, resurrected, the reincarnation of someone he’d known well once, long ago, raised from her ruins, guiding him by the elbow to the head of the table, in the place of honour, as though she were proud of him for what – for being himself?

Ricco tried to chime with her mood, but he couldn’t. Everywhere he looked, a mist he knew no-one else could see dimmed the light. Wherever he turned, everything – everyone – drew back.

Sherie was talking fifteen to the dozen about what had happened that day, what she’d thought and felt about it, what she’d wanted to do and hadn’t quite got to yet, what she had planned for the next day and the day after, on and on. He tried to show an interest – he wanted to – but it was difficult even to pretend to listen. Her voice was so irritating. Didn’t she know that? Why couldn’t she give him some peace? Would it have killed her to shut up occasionally?

He knew that when he walked from the room the world on the other side of their front door would have changed irretrievably. Picturing himself at a favourite place near his shop by some stone steps from which he liked to look out across the bay to the sea beyond, he shuddered at the very thought of what he’d once taken as read, taken for granted.

This is what it was to be stricken, then. He’d sympathised, without knowing what sympathy meant, what was required of it, not really. This is what it had meant, every day, all day, to his wife. This is what it was to feel completely helpless, and blame yourself for it.

When Sherie, noticing, asked if he were all right and he tried to smile, his face felt as tight and shrunken as one of those skulls explorers bring back from jungles to put on show in glass cases in museums.
He didn’t keep his appointment with the bank manager. He didn’t go to his shop, either. Instead he took buses at random, one after another, any destination would have done. He let chance decide.

Once, walking through one of the parks, he stopped and said:

‘What do you want? I’m not Jesus Christ!’ so loudly some people nearby turned around. A jogger in satiny shorts left his iPod for a moment to call over his shoulder:

‘Good choice, buddy. Look what they did to him, right?’

Towards mid-afternoon, Ricco began to think about illness, the mystery of it, after all these centuries of trying to cure ourselves, then of particular people he’d known who’d fallen ill and their various strategies for managing their decline. Images, at first brief and interrupted, then more continuous and coherent, of the living, those easing their way out of life, and those who had passed on, kept coming to him, coming at him.

He walked until he came to a hospital. The images stopped the moment he arrived outside its entrance. Standing quite still in front of the massive façade, its concrete steps rising steeply to great wooden doors that reminded him of an entrance to some law courts he’d seen somewhere, a palace of justice, he felt a calm he hadn’t experienced for years – not since he was a boy, before life began to catch up to him, to catch him.

He saw what had to be done. It wasn’t a choice, more of an obvious direction he hadn’t been equipped to notice previously, a conclusion waiting for him all along. It wasn’t that he wanted what was coming either, not at all. Everyone has a claim on life, beyond reason or the need for explanation. But this was the right, the appropriate, thing as far as he was concerned. There could be no doubt of that.

Ricco walked up the steps to the hospital. Approaching the first nurse he saw, he said:

‘I want to speak to someone who’s dying’.
Plato and Gorgias walk into a Symposium

Jonathan Paul Marshall

Gorgias: I would like to talk with you about literature.

Plato: A low subject I think, not worthy of philosophic consideration, but in keeping with your general aims I suppose. Let us see if we can convert you then to the true love of wisdom and not just sophistry. I suggest we begin by remembering that writing produces forgetfulness in the soul, as it is a reminder not a remembering. So the basis of literature is a diminution of soul to begin with.

G: I wouldn’t want to devalue memory, after all I remember whole speeches, but is memory the most important thing? Is memory as excellent as understanding or knowledge, for example? Might not reminding, sometimes, be all we need, and what we need exactly?

P: Need for what? That is the question.

G: For the situation we find ourselves in.

P: And what does this ‘need’, in those ‘situations’, have in common?

G: It may not have anything in common. It’s a word not a reality; although as a word it seduces us to its reality. Why should we assume that everything can be defined, and every situation that we use the same word for has some one thing in common? Such a demand already implies the world is static or fixed, rather than in constant change with our understanding moving likewise, in ongoing change, to keep up with that world.

P: Then what does that word ‘need’ mean?

G: Let me shift a little as I think you might be asking me about what I know? Well what is knowledge, then?

P: Knowledge of the One is but one.

G: Ah, I see, to return to literature all we need do is remember your dialogues and thus we will reach that One. All else can be destroyed or bypassed.

P: All that is false can be bypassed, once we know it is false. But that is why we need dialectic. My dialogues are of no value in themselves, unless they lead to the One, and that can be better done here, in speech, as it is.

G: So we do not, in fact, need to remember large amounts of what they will, in times to come, call ‘data’. In which case literature is no more a diminution than is speech.

P: You are confusing the issue. Rather than writing, people need a teacher, just as seeds need a farmer.
G: I’m not sure seeds actually need a farmer, and do seeds remember? But that people need a teacher is what I’ve said all along! And a true teacher should teach people to think about multiplicity, not to parrot the One.

P: Hmm, you might need a teacher but you might never learn.

G: Perhaps I need reminding? Or is it just that you go on ‘saying the same thing over and over forever’ like words in text? Personally, and I don’t use the word casually, I think that future readers will never agree on your words as meaning the same thing for each reader, any more than they will agree on the meaning of lyric poetry.

P: That is why words need a father to help them, not be illegitimately spawned of writing.

G: That statement sounds awe-fully like poetry to me, and it wasn’t my experience with my father, but that is by the by. Previously I told you that thought could not be extracted from rhetoric – and, of course, using the term ‘extraction’ is more poetry – so is my use of ‘is’ in that equivalence. Thought about anything important requires analogy and metaphor and hence always has the possibility of being wrong, so we should explore different ways of thinking about the same thing and explore different metaphors. But then you chopped up my argument in your writing, so no one knows what I said.

P: That proves my point, and you cannot make your argument without dialogue.

G: Yes, your falsehood is compelling ... Ahg Sometimes I get a headache ...

P: The rewards of lack of excellence, and inability to tame the body.

G: Thank you. However, to return to the discussion. There is a stage, when I am really dead say, at which I will not be able to directly teach people about multiplicity of views, thought and the necessity of rhetoric. Therefore, there is no point to anyone remembering what I have said on particular occasions, as these occasions will not be replicated, given that all is change. Thus it is better to be reminded of the principles of what I, or you for that matter, have said, so the person can think for themselves.

P: I trust that your desire to be forgotten will be met.

G: Hmm, must be in my imagination that you’ve got quite so catty ... But let us take your own dialogues. I presume they are not word for word transcriptions.

P: No they are re-creations, attempts to present what I could remember as best I could remember in leisure and on reflection. I hope I manage to convey Socrates’ person and exemplar as well as possible.

G: I think it is the portrayal of Socrates that will be remembered, and indeed that picture, that image, will probably be remembered better than the actual points of his arguments. But my point is the dialogues are not entirely accurate. Do you agree?
P: They are accurate to the spirit, shall we say, but writing is deficient, as Socrates has said, so they fall short.

G: Would it make any difference to their accuracy if you simply spoke the dialogues to an audience, so that they were not written? Would it be better if they were simply conveyed by memory, and even more likely to be forgotten?

P: On the latter point perhaps we can agree; it is better they are less likely to be forgotten, and so writing has some value. But if they were spoken aloud and if people questioned me about them, then we could see if they understood, and perhaps I could teach them, and this would be an improvement. If they were written and just read, then their meaning could be lost.

G: Perhaps, but your audience would not be questioning Socrates and what he said?

P: No. It would be better if they could of course. I am not as wise as he.

G: So what you are admitting is that the dialogues are not entirely accurate?

P: As I have said, they are not completely accurate or effective, they are written.

G: So they are false.

P: I wouldn’t go that far. They say the truth, but that truth cannot always be found.

G: I think we just agreed on something else, but I will return to that later. Let me say, that you seem to be saying the dialogues are poetic recreations, not literal truths.

P: You are twisting my words.

G: I’m just trying to understand. You see, you blackened the name of ‘sophist’ with ‘liar’, ‘deception’ and ‘falsehood’ and, so I’m trying to understand how you successfully do this in a format that is also false, inadequate and deceptive and shall we say, as a result, specious? I presume it is the rhetoric of the dialogues that makes them seem real?

P: I would say that people recognise the truth, or awaken to the truth when reading them or thinking about them.

G: Making this ‘seeming’ or ‘recognition’ is one of the things rhetoric and poetry is about. At least I don’t claim what I espouse as ultimate truth. Anyway, as I have said, your argument presupposes that writing is not all bad?

P: It is not as good as the real thing.

G: It has now become the ‘real’ thing.

P: That is my point. However, your argument, in this case, presupposes that writing is all bad, and thus the writing is false.

G: I’m nothing if not inconsistent.
P: My point exactly. Therefore there is no trusting you, and no virtue in you.

G: I’m obvious about what I do. I think that you disagree in public but agree in practice. Thus let us agree the dialogues are not true accounts, therefore they are false, even if they are useful lies. And of course you cannot deny that you have Socrates argue in favour of the noble lie. Let us claim the dialogues are noble lies – we can debate whether they are ‘noble’ or not later.

P: There you go too far. However, you sophists tried to display that there was no truth, so you would not recognise it in any case.

G: It is not correct that we said there was necessarily no truth, we tried to display that truth is hard to find and suggest that it is easy to be deceived, and so it is good to be able to master all arguments, so as not to be seduced by the one.

P: Can there be more than one truth?

G: I don’t know – and neither do you.

P: If truth is not one then it is incoherent.

G: If truth is plural, or if we cannot guarantee to reach the one, or if different questions do not have the same answer, then that is simply a fact of life. No amount of philosophy will change it – and someone saying they have reached the one is not that persuasive to me – why might they not be mistaken, or engaging in what they call a noble lie?

P: If you cannot see truth is one, then you truly have no inner sense of virtue.

G: That strikes me as a abuse, not argument. What you are saying is that I sense differently from you, and therefore I must be wrong and deficient. But let us think further about this noble lie, which is not just an ordinary lie. You say that sometimes your one truth needs noble lies to support it, because someone thinks this truth should not be thought by those that they think are less wise than them?

P: That may be true.

G: In that case you noble philosophers have an interest in keeping people ignorant, and therefore, according to your own arguments, non-virtuous. In which case, how can this truth of yours be virtuous?

P: As in the mysteries, not everyone is ready to be told, at that one time.

G: That seems to me, to be simply saying, as did Thrasymachus, that Justice is the advantage of the stronger, and that virtue is as decided by those in power.

P: I refuted that position in the dialogue on the Republic.

G: Whilst in practice supporting it ... But let us return to the earlier discussion. Did Socrates argue exactly as you say?
P: No, but in my dialogues he argues according to his principles.

G: So we are back to where I started – what we sometimes need is not remembering, but a reminder of principles and hence the ability to argue from principles, so writing has its uses?

P: Yes.

G: But it is not true. Therefore not-truth also has its uses in serving virtue?

P: That sounds specious to me.

G: You have said I’m specious remember, and it is what the noble lie implies. However let me make another argument, this time as to why oratory is superior to writing.

P: It will serve to illuminate the failures of your warped thinking.

G: That is pure supposition. But let me begin. Oratory is better because it is not fixed, it is remembered. Writing fixes truth, as for example, people will think they know what Plato thought because of his dialogues, but in fact that writing imprisons Plato, so that he never gets to say what he wants or changes it to fit the situation.

P: That is very close to what I’m saying, but I can see a problem with the way you approach the issue.

G: Indeed, but what I am talking about is a virtue. In the oral tradition, Plato would be pliable, and could be adapted to the situation as it is. In practice, the oral tradition accepts that virtue is always situational, it responds to a situation here and now, not to an abstraction, not to an ideal. We are not imprisoned by your writing – we can develop it. We can, just as you may have done with Socrates, attribute convenient opinions to you, which you never actually said, or held.

P: You are trying to sway our audience by constantly reiterating falsehood about me. But the truth is that truth does not adapt, it is one.

G: That would be reassuring to some people, but is it true? How would you know that is true? : While statements may be more or less true, there may be no Truth itself, that could be another seduction of the tongue. If I agree that a statement may be true, then I am not really implying that there is such a thing as ‘truth’, any more than the existence of a beautiful youth or a beautiful day implies the existence of ‘beauty’, or a good act or a good meal imply existence of ‘the good’. If we say otherwise, as it seems to me you do, then we treat truth as an object, although an ideal object, and thus render it untrue, and indeed inclined to decay and to pass – although why shouldn’t truth change like everything else? On the other hand, there may be many types of truth. As for example the statement ‘Socrates is a man’ is true by definition; ‘the sun is up’ is true or false by observation – after we have agreed on the rough meaning of the words, of course. If we are aware of these differences then perhaps it will help us on our quest?

P: I see you are now trying to attack the eternal archetypes, which are the basis of the real and true. You are also saying you do not understand truth, in which case what is the point of arguing with you?

G: My point is that you don’t understand truth either. You are rushing away from mystery to resolution in an ideal imagining. But you are right about my aspersions on your idea of archetypes. I’m not sure the archetypes are one, or eternal, or unchanging, and I’m not sure your idea of them is true.

P: They are an expression of the One.

G: So the One is multiple, I see, or it has no effect. But that is not my problem with the Archetypes or the Ideas or whatever you want to call them.

P: I’m not responsible for translators.

G: Everyone translates when they read or hear, even if in their own language. We are all creative mysteries to each other, which we diminish, by guessing and by checking, but which we never get to the end of.

P: Socrates refuted the Man is the measure of all things argument.

G: Clever of him, and what did he use to measure his argument, or get people to agree to his argument? But I’m not exactly making that claim at this moment, I’m just saying that communication supposes misunderstanding, and deceit, just as much as it supposes accuracy. Indeed you assume I’m lying all the time.

P: It saves time, and I assume you are more interested in displaying a copy of wisdom than manifesting real wisdom.

G: That leads into the question of why a display (or copy) could be bad, if it was a display of virtue and if the way that virtue was learnt was through emulation of the copy. I think we have agreed your dialogues are such a copy …, but again the problem with the archetypes is simple. If they are real then nothing else is real.

P: That is not a problem but, if seen properly, the great insight.

G: So we don’t have to be virtuous towards anyone, we don’t have to care about any particular person here and now, or any polis, or any current excellence, because they are not really real, just mere copies and derivatives. The reality is beyond what we perceive and live with. By this action, you strip the Earth, and the Gods, of meaning, making them colourful allegories. And yet, from another view, are not the archetypes just the allegory of what is really real? You talk about them in myths, in poetry.

P: Perhaps I veil? But by being virtuous you come closer to the reality of the archetype.

G: So virtue is always situated somewhere else, as allegory perhaps, away from this reality.

P: What then is real?

G: Again, I don’t know, and despite your claims, neither do you.

P: A person who does not know what is really real will not live well.
G: Probably true, but humour me, I will argue that your archetypes are not only not real, but lead people into living badly. Indeed they propel people into the kind of living that must necessarily lead to noble lies, or falsehoods, and deceit, and that is because their basis is unreal, and that unreality makes the world appear unreal to the believer, and thus justifies anything. And please understand in this case I am not arguing that one should never say a falsehood (or indeed could live without occasionally being false), I am saying that it is a fundamental contradiction for you, and in rendering you real, I render you unreal.

P: Oh very well I can see that you are going to make speeches now. Let me question you as you go along.

G: Certainly. Let us begin with your Symposium.

[Enter Aristophanes, drunk]

A: Hello all …

P: What are you doing here?

A: I thought I heard something about a symposium. You can’t have a symposium without Aristophanes. You need a comic, and some wine, for the God’s sake. Do either of you honour Dionysius? Thought not. In such philosophic ways you miss something that is vital to the cosmos. Can you honestly look around and not see the joke?

P: What joke?

A: Thought so. As if the universe was all triangyles and squares with sharp points, sticking into us everywhere. Attack, Attack, Attack. Ouch, Ouch, Ouch.

P: You probably mean tetrahedrons and cubes.

G: I thought it was the sphere that was supposed to be perfect?

A: There’s the archetype of the tetra-thingy and the cube, and the sphere, and then the archetype of the polyhedra, and then the archetype of the solid, and the archetype of the form of the solid and then the form, and the archetypes of the form – from which all forms descend like diarrhoea. And what about the Archetype of the Gods and the One? The whole thing goes on forever.

P: The One is primary.

A: Why doesn’t it need an archetype two? With a poetic fit coming on, I pronounce, that Nothing is really primary, unless it’s Nothing; the void – Great Khaos. Khaos expresses the content of thought and life, and the necessity that it is always out of our control, like my feet here. I wish I could scan extempore properly. Anyway, I’ll take that Goddess as real, and say all your Archetypes are secondary; otherwise there could not be as many as there are, and we see variation wherever we look. Infinite variation, everywhere we look. I trip over them all the time. It’s like Fate.
G: I’ll put in a vote for all the Gods, someone has to defend multiplicity, rather than just the one of chaos or Oneness – you two are mirrors of each other – both teaching morals, as if that was not a continual struggle and set of dilemmas. Ethics is only dilemmas and context and that is what I teach – the world as paradox.

A: Without Khaos we would have no choice, so we would have no virtue. Ethics involves dealing with Khaos with humour, as humour is the only justified response to the order of the Gods and cosmos, or their lack of order. The pratfall is the joyous epitome of human effort. And so all good tragedies finish with a Satyr Play and acknowledge the superiority of the comic – or at least its inevitability. Five or so hours of Agathon agony and it’s a real relief. Ahhh! More diarrhoea.

G: Making the comic that important is turning things upside down – I think that is what our friend Plato accuses us of doing.

P: And so you do, misleading youth and people. How can you have a comic monarch and thus good government? Is he to give out tall tales as legislation? Wave a long phallus about? How can you say humour is virtue?

[G and A look at each other] Sounds good to us …

P: But what about order? Isn’t order central to the well-run polis? And isn’t seriousness and deep consideration vital to that order?

G: To say humour is virtue is not to say it’s the only virtue, and (as we know) order can be a tool of tyranny. But talking of tyranny, tell me, Aristophanes, what did you think of Socrates?

A: It’s in my Clouds play, and a good play too despite coming last in the competition.

P: A pack of lies, that by itself demonstrates why poets have no place in a just society.

A: No one comes to my work for accurate, minute, ant crawling descriptions of philosophic doxa – not if they can tell reality from sky – which was my point of course. However, you sir, routinely travestied your opponents and will lead generations into thinking they heard the real thing.

G: Glad you agree. But what did you think of Socrates?

A: Like you two, and like Euripides, dangerous men, dangerous men without an ounce of sense between you all, not even a bird’s fart worth. You are all snide and corrupting of everything that is finest in our polis.

P: That may be true of Euripides, but it is certainly not true of Socrates who put virtue before all.

A: Ah yes, ‘Virtue all’, I now see! How very wise of him. But like many of those who do put virtue first, he lived in the clouds of ideas and ideals and never dealt with the things a human has to live with here on Earth. By ignoring what you call the trivial you wreck human lives, and it’s up to me to save them. And what are we to think when our fate hangs with a fat drunkard?
G: I don’t think there’s a serious answer to that.

P: If we take care of the important then, by definition, we take care of the lesser, so your charge is easily refuted.

G: This is an assertion about definition yet again. Who knows whether your idea of ‘important’ actually covers what you consider to be the trivial? Or whether the trivial is not important, on at least some occasions?

P: That is pure sophistry.

G: Thank you. It is practical wisdom, at the least. Anyway, Aristophanes, why was Euripides dangerous?

A: Someone once told me some words, supposedly said by some son of Zeus or Dionysius: could never work out which, perhaps it was both? ‘Hey dad, let’s go out for a screw, put these thrysi to work’.

P: We are not in the theatre now, before the vulgar.

A: More’s the pity. The vulgar, as you call them, recognise where their oil comes from, and one of my plays tells you more about real virtue than all the dialogues of Plato and Socrates put together. Actually, now that I think of it, the more you read Plato the less virtuous you will become – certainly was the case with Socrates’ pupils. Which gets us back to this son of Zeus, or Dionysius, or whoever, who said ‘by their fruit shall you know them’. Which in plain terms for the ears of the wise, who gather round the portals of the mysteries, means that apple trees have apples and that crab-apple trees have crab-apples.

G: A wise man obviously …

A: Let’s be clear here. Alcibiades, pupil and kissy boy of Socrates, betrays anyone for his personal glory, repeatedly. Knocks the dicks off statues and profanes the mysteries in the streets – and you call my plays crass. Critias becomes dictator along with Charmides, ruling Athens in submission to Sparta; in a fine display of logic chopping they leave blood all over Eleusis – what kind of Socratic piety or virtue is that? Even Xenophon, a good old fashioned country gent, ends up all Spartan. And of course Plato here wars against Athens in favour of Sparta in his literature. All of them support authoritarianism, because the people laugh at them, knowing better. Now me, I’m happy if the people laugh at me, no problem there, and any wise man acknowledges his foul-ups and his fate, but not these people who feed on their mother and try and destroy her so as to make wise men the only important thing.

P: Sparta was imperfect, but it was a fine disciplined and noble state.

A: That’s the kind of rubbish philosopher’s talk.

P: Well prove it.
A: Like taking beans from a bowl. Which had the better plays, Athens or Sparta? Which had the better sculptors? Which had the better painters?

P: Art is a lie, a mere copy of a copy. This is no argument.

A: Who wants to live where there is no art? Where we cannot express ourselves or the universe? What real human would want that? Even to think that way shows a moral incapacity I cannot begin to satirise.

P: You just defend your personal interests, and do not seek the One beyond interest. Art will not make excellence.

A: Even you, when talking of the ultimate things use art. In denying the basis of your philosophy, you become a hypocrite and morally compromised, as should be obvious. But more to your liking: which polis had the better Philosophers? Which made the boldest political experiment?

P: Sparta was order and courage incarnate – what about the glory of Thermopylae?

A: Yes that was brave, no denying, but what then about Marathon and Salamis? The first one the Spartans couldn’t even be bothered to turn up for. What is so great about suppressing more and more of the people who provide your food, so that you have almost no time for anything else? It’s simple-minded drudgery dressed as valour. Which town had the leisure to listen to Socrates?

P: And which put him to death?

G: If I may interrupt, don’t you in one of your works recommend death for people who promulgate unbelief?

P: Yes. Unbelief of truth because, clearly, maintaining unity and truth is important to the life of a polis.

G: So let me get this straight. It is acceptable for your philosophical elite to secretly put people to death for unbelief, but not for a court to openly try Socrates for actively promoting the same thing?

P: He taught against ignorance, and for valuing the truth; there is nothing similar at all.

G: A matter of doxa I would think. The Athenian court offered him compromise after compromise, which he rejected.

P: Can’t you understand? He rejected falsity. The Athenians were wrong.

G: Maybe, but perhaps, just perhaps, your philosophers can also be wrong, or motivated by human failings, especially if they don’t understand paradox and myth. Perhaps your wise men will sacrifice another Socrates?

P: Proper lovers of wisdom do not use the Law lightly.
G: Neither I think did the Athenians. By rejecting all their offers and escapes, Socrates committed suicide. He wanted to die and thus pass into your truly real reality – you say so yourself – and he was not bold enough to do it himself. In love with death and its superiority to life; his suicide was his final act against Athens.

A: We must honour Hades. But not at the expense of all life itself.

G: Not making life a copy of death.

P: You as unwise sophists cannot see the glory of the One.

G: So you reveal your One is death.

P: Sometimes I don’t know why I bother.

A: How long would Socrates have lasted in Sparta in any case?

P: He would have been honoured.

A: That’s living with the birds. If you want more proof of the superiority of Athens, of a type that will no doubt appeal more to you, who had the bigger empire?

G: Athens of course. But then Plato’s fictional Crete was to have no contact with foreigners, to avoid the spectre of difference in behaviour and belief, so the argument might not be that persuasive to him. However, if I understand the course of this argument, we are close to implying that loving both tyranny and death is an essential part of Platonic Philosophy?

A: I suppose so. If you support the One, and only the One, and that One is order above all, then you have no room for Khaos and life, and so you support tyranny. Like a dog you want a master, and everything that is not One is trimmed to fit. Plato’s den is covered with bits of fingers and toes, and the odd half skullcap. Getting inside that philosophy, you find it a cave of shadows and branding irons and need to get out into the agora as soon as possible. And have sex with a willing girl.

P: Your comic pose is a cover, as you hate everyone.

G: No one lives up to ideals, and everyone lives up to their ideals, but no one agrees on the Good.

P: What you forget is that we all intrinsically know what is good, the dialectic merely allows its birth.

G: What I think you show is that people want to think of themselves as good.

P: And thus, when they are clear in mind, as opposed to confused by sophists, they will do what is good.

G: Why will they not do evil in the name of good, thinking it good? Especially if their companions tell them it is good?
P: To repeat, they need to know the good for themselves, not depend on others.

G: Not even those who attempt to birth the knowledge within them?

P: Those people already have knowledge.

G: But what if that knowledge is mistaken, or the situation can be framed in different ways, and given the variety of things and events is it possible we can exhaust those situations in advance? What if one person or creature’s good is not another person or creature’s good, as when we eat the lamb? What if there is no One? Let me ask Aristophanes again, as I suspect it is relevant, what was so bad about Euripides?

A: A man who worries about hurting the enemy and how they suffer in the heat of war, cannot fight. If he cannot fight, then his polis, his wife and children, are raped and become slaves. In the midst of the war with Sparta, that was all Euripides could show us; we wept for our enemies. It is one thing to criticise the progress of the war – I did it myself – it is another thing to sap the will to fight. Name me another town that could have accepted it, or would have accepted it. I honour Euripides, because I wept too. He was a great artist. I figure him dangerous for the same reason. At least he did not support the victors.

P: This shows the danger of art and the incoherence of your idea of virtue.

G: What if virtue is not coherent?

A: Do I need an idea of virtue, in the first place? What if it is not an idea? If it cannot be summed up by an idea? Any more than wine is just an idea of wine? Well outside your philosophy anyway.

G: I think Euripides shows complexity, paradox and reality. War is tragedy, war is glory. War is cruelty, war is courage. Without those poles you have no sense of what it is like, and no sense of the appeal and the affect. Saying war is stupid alone, then you will be taken in by the first person who can persuade you that attack is glory and defence lies in pre-emptive action. Yet, as Heraclitus says ‘war is the father of all things’.

A: Personally, I prefer Hesiod who distinguishes between strife and war. War is cruel and harsh, but we are forced to honour her, and prepare for her, by the will of the Gods. The other is far kinder to men and stirs even the shiftless to toil, so that we are propelled by it. But Enyo and Eris are not the same. Honour to them both.

G: The ambiguity is more explicit in the poet, I agree.

P: How then should we wage war?

A: Personally I would ask a general who was successful in many battles, not a philosopher. Just as I would not ask Socrates about love or how to write a play, or a dog how to ride a horse.

P: You are changing the subject. How can I dialogue with people whose idea of philosophy is diatribe and who won’t stay fixed?
G: Recognise the reality that nothing is fixed, and then you can cope. You don’t have to seek for the definition of every word – but wait! Your whole philosophy falls apart …

A: I am keeping to the subject. Let me see … if you have disqualified yourself from talking about love by your treatment of your spouse and children, and dismiss the power of Eros, the next God after Khaos by the way, by saying everyone should fuck for the benefit of the State and put away their children, then you clearly don’t understand anything about love. Where do you treat love as anything other than desire? Where is the idea of ‘caring for’, or ‘compassion’?

P: That is simply desire for another’s good. As I have said Socrates mastered his passion, and realised that the highest love is directed to wisdom.

A: Ideals, to sacrifice reality to again, and messily as well. ‘I only see order because I ignore the rest’. Not my wife, my son, my daughter, my polis, my gods, my companions, but disembodied Wisdom. Our friend Gorgias said something more to the point: ‘If Love, being a god, has the divine power of the gods, how could a lesser being reject and refuse that power? But if Love is a human disease and a fault within the soul, we should not blame it for lack of virtue, but regard it as an affliction.’ We are driven by gods or flaws in our souls, and you, Plato, either deny this or would choose the object of your love to be inhuman. What I recommend is, laugh and celebrate the Gods, and cry and bemoan our sufferings, but carry on. That is a real philosophy, not avoiding your responsibilities, passions and afflictions, and not sacrificing your fellows to an abstract ideal.

G: Which ideal is One, and denies the other Gods.

A: That Socrates should desire to transcend his body and his lover’s body, is not to be wondered at, in a man who considers death a better state. I love you so much I must die – I’d rather resurrect and go again. Not to say that we must never die gloriously, but we do so for the living.

P: This is deliberate misreading of my work and confirms my view of literature. But let us return to the issue of Gods. Aristophanes believes the primal God is Khaos, and the second God is Eros …

A: And now you want me to define them?

P: Well yes …

A: Are you mad? Read Hesiod. Read my Birds, if you want.

P: Don’t you contradict yourself then? Besides Hesiod makes Earth the second and Eros the third.

A: When we touch on mysteries, the things we can never know, then poets frame them in words that we do know. How can we do otherwise?

P: Surely we can proceed through love of wisdom?
A: Your Wisdom is just bad poetry. An excellent poet sees the whole of human life, and hence poets are our true legislators and open our vision. Without them we are blind.

P: With them we are even more blind as they retail fiction, and drunken fiction at that. How do we know that what they say is true? Even the genealogies they give differ, one from the other.

A: Most people in their normal state, and me in my drunken state, know that what poets say is poetry. It makes no claim to absolute accuracy, but it is necessary because of who and what we are.

G: As I said, Plato, your philosophy demands myth, poetry and narrative at its base. You deny it, while I claim it is fundamental to your philosophy and indeed any philosophy. Our axioms cannot be proved any other way.

A: You kill poets as you want no opposition. No other metaphors but yours, which you pretend are true, or you push embarrassingly to one side, pretending to have done it all by reason alone. We Athenians have an altar to the unknown Gods. Truly the vulgar, as you call them, are wiser than philosophers. They know there are unknowns and they recognise those unknowns. Who truly knows all the Gods and all the mysteries?

G: But we know they are not one.

P: This is a waste of time. Neither of you will argue properly so I’m off to where dialectic is more fruitful. [He leaves]

G: We will not argue in the way that you want to argue, is what you mean? And isn’t this ‘fruitful’ just another set of poetic metaphors?

A: Well I think I’ve another idea for a comedy, or perhaps another libation, so I’ll be off too. Thanks gents. [He leaves]

G: And me. I think, at this moment anyway, that Platonism is a philosophy that values abstract ideals, and hence degrades life to a secondary place making death superior; that it renders virtue and excellence impossible because believers cannot respond to a situation as it is, but only to the One (or should they be virtuous in practice they deny their philosophy). It denigrates and denies the myths, images and narrative which form its base or its literature, and it demands tyranny, falsehood and the end of philosophic talk. It loves perfection but Ah Perfection, where is thy sting?

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