

Introduction

The literary dialogue originated with Plato and Xenophon, who sought a form that would reproduce the dialectical give-and-take for which their teacher, Socrates, was both celebrated and condemned. Socrates himself believed that philosophy begins in doubt and proceeds through trial and error: that it is peripatetic in the mental as well as the physical sense. Philosophical wondering demands, in other words, a kind of literary wandering, an itinerant form that is exploratory, desultory, improvisational—more interested in the journey than the destination. As a genre, the dialogue has proven remarkably durable, generating not only Plato's extraordinary canon, but also some of the most memorable works of philosophy and literature in the West, from Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Malebranche's *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion* and Fénelon's *Dialogues of the Dead* to Berkeley's *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, Landor's *Imaginary Conversations* and Wilde's "The Critic as Artist." The success of the dialogue has not, however, extended quite so confidently into the modern period, where with a few exceptions—one thinks of Santayana's *Dialogues in Limbo* or Murdoch's *Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues*—it has mostly fallen out of fashion. In the hope of reviving this fading form, we have written ten dialogues on a range of topics relating to literature, art and culture. Our dialogues are, however, different from those named above because they are genuine exchanges: not monologues disguised as dialogues but a play of two distinct voices and two distinct minds engaged in cajoling, objecting, correcting and challenging but always questioning. In the process, we have attempted both to renew and reinvent the dialogue as a literary and philosophical exploration.

Our book is organized into three sections. Part One: "Art and Aesthetics" includes meditations on the aesthetics of banality ("Flaubert's Hat Trick"), the uses and abuses of recent literary

criticism (“The Dysfunction of Criticism at the Present Time”) and *mimesis* from the Greeks to the present (“The Grapes of Zeuxis”). Part Two: “Evil, Death, Love, Politics” examines evil from the Book of Genesis to Conrad and the Holocaust (“The Art of Darkness”), suicide and death from Shakespeare to Beckett (“Let’s Hang Ourselves Immediately!”), the shrunken fortunes of *erōs* in modern life (“On the Eros of Species”) and the troubling, poignant—and often hilarious—degradation of American culture (“The Benighted States of America?”). Finally, Part Three: “Philosophical Digressions” investigates Descartes and the Enlightenment tradition (“The Last of the Cartesians”), the philosophy of memory and forgetting (“Nietzsche’s Cow”) and the art of the Platonic dialogue (“Socrates Among the Cicadas”).

Although we have entitled our collection *Platonic Occasions*, we are not ourselves Platonists. To the contrary, as students of Richard Rorty we trace our intellectual affiliations to a decidedly less idealist, less metaphysical tradition—to philosophers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Derrida. Nevertheless, we are attracted to Plato and his canon for two reasons. First, our own dialogues focus on precisely the topics that most animated Plato’s thinking and that he so memorably examined: love, death, good, evil, memory, art, representation and political governance. Second, we are attracted to the dialogue as a form, especially insofar as it registers the delicate movement and play of thought about a subject. While we have fundamental disagreements with Plato on a host of philosophical issues, we nevertheless believe that his writings are a good deal more open-ended, open-minded, indeed dialogical, than has generally been appreciated.

The dialogues in this volume were produced over several years as a series of e-mail exchanges. Some of the dialogues began when one of us posed a question to the other, with the ensuing conversation developing from that slender beginning. In other cases, we decided in advance to explore a particular subject, but never knew where our exchange would take us or to what conclusions it might lead. In all cases, we followed a simple but absolute rule: once an entry had been submitted it could not, under any circumstances, be revised. This meant that in our polemical back-and-forth if one of us got the better of the other—as occasionally happened—our

triumphs and defeats were fully on display. Like a game of chess, there were no “take-backs,” thereby guaranteeing the intellectual honesty and integrity of the dialogues. This commitment to preserving our exchanges as written keeps them, we hope, from feeling staged or formulaic—as is sometimes the case in Plato—and lends them a conversational immediacy.

All our dialogues address what are sometimes called the Big Questions: what is love, truth, art, beauty, evil and death? We are aware that such questions can never be answered, at least not in any final or definitive sense. But if we wish to experience fully what it means to be human—if we seek to live what Plato called the “examined life” (*Apology*, 38a)—then we must continue to ask these questions, not in the expectation of answering them but in the conviction that by striving to do so we will better comprehend who we are and what we might achieve. Martin Heidegger devoted much of his philosophy to what is called the *Seinsfrage*, a question that asks not simply “Why am I?” but more fundamentally “What does it mean to be?” And yet, if such a question admits of no answer, then what is the point of asking it? Here is what Richard Rorty says on this subject:

I think Heidegger goes on and on about “the question of Being” without ever answering it because Being is a good example of something we have no criteria for answering questions about. It is a good example of something we have no handle on, no tools for manipulating—something which resists “the technical interpretation of thinking.” The reason Heidegger talks about Being is not that he wants to direct our attention to an unfortunately neglected topic of inquiry, but that he wants to direct our attention to the difference between inquiry and poetry, between struggling for power and accepting contingency. He wants to suggest what a culture might be like in which poetry rather than philosophy-cum-science was the paradigmatic human activity. The question “What is Being?” is no more to be *answered correctly* than the question “What is a cherry blossom?” But the latter question is, nevertheless, one you might use to set the theme of a poetry competition. The former question is, so to speak, what the Greeks happened to come up with when they set the theme upon which the West has been a set of variations.

The dialogic experiment that Socrates inaugurated and that Plato immortalized understands that the questions most worth asking are precisely those that have no answers. These are questions that stand beyond the purview of the technocrat, the statistician or the actuary, questions that are best approached by accepting the contingencies of conversation and inquiry, the thrust and counter-thrust of minds caught in the act of thinking and attempting to feel their way around a problem, even if it means never arriving at a solution. As Socrates points out in *Apology*, the highest wisdom consists in recognizing the limits of one's own knowledge, which is to say, in acknowledging one's own ignorance. At the same time, it is worth remembering that Plato, whose ambition as a young man was to be a tragedian, employs the form of the dialogue to mix philosophy with literature. He creates characters, places them in dramatic situations and supplies them with witty and compelling dialogue. As everyone knows, Plato became the most celebrated critic of literature, the philosopher who infamously "banned the poets" from his "Republic." But—as we argue in our concluding dialogue—Plato's position on poetry in particular and the arts in general is a good deal more complicated than such a reading allows. Indeed, Plato's philosophy is a marriage of logic and rhetoric, one that weds the rigor of the thinker with the invention of the poet.

About halfway through Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*—a play very much concerned with the *Seinsfrage*—Clov asks that most existential of all questions: "What is there to keep me here?" Hamm replies, without hesitation, "The dialogue." The exchange is quintessentially Beckettian, at once deeply ironic and deeply earnest. We hope that our dialogues—which we have sought to make playfully serious and seriously playful—will suffice to keep readers here, keep them attentive and engaged. And if, along the way, what we have written diverts as well as instructs, we will be all the more grateful.