CHAPTER THREE

CRITIAS'S CHARACTER (2)

Timaeus's monologue is a performance so brilliant as to condemn to anti-climax anything which follows it. This unexpected triumph provokes Critias to discard the trappings of generosity, courtesy, and comradeship which had earlier veiled his true nature and to expose the harsh and insolent and deceitful reality.¹ Let us begin with Timaeus's closing words (106 A).

Timaeus. How gladly, Socrates, like one taking a rest after a long journey, do I now welcome my release from the journey of my discourse. And to the God who in fact came into being long ago, but has just now come into being in words, I offer my prayer that to whatever we have said correctly he will grant that it survives, but that, if involuntarily we have said anything wrong, he will impose the fitting penalty. And the fitting penalty is to bring him that is out of tune into tune. In order then that henceforth we may give a correct account of the birth of the gods, we pray that he will give us that most perfect and best of medicines, knowledge. And having offered prayer we give over to Critias, in accordance with the agreement, the next word.

Critias. And, Timaeus, I take it; . . .

One cannot help feeling a certain rudeness in Critias's manner of taking the floor in view of the magnitude of Timaeus's achievement, his therefore large contribution to the partners' repayment of Socrates, and his evident exhaustion. But a more serious, though subtler, question of courtesy is raised by Critias's response. All of the partners' monologues, being repayments of Socrates's generosity, should be addressed primarily to Socrates, an elementary propriety which Timaeus twice observes at the beginning, and once at the end, of his discourse (27 C, 29 C, 106 A). It follows, then, that Socrates should have the first word upon the completion of a discourse in order to express his judgement on it and his thanks to the speaker. But Critias boorishly anticipates him and

¹ Compare Critias's behavior with that of Solon in Egypt, who is much pleased when the priest tells him, one of the Seven Sages, that he is an ignoramus, and wants to hear more (23 D). Cf. Rep. 409 C on the inability of the cunning and bad man to recognize the wise and good.
launches at once into his own really astounding exordium (106 B-108 A).

What you yourself used at the beginning, demanding indulgence on the ground that you were going to speak about great matters, that same request I, too, now make.

Critias's first words are subtly prejudicial to Timaeus: Timaeus used a tactic (ἕχρήσω); Timaeus demanded (ἀλτοῦμενος) but Critias requests (παραχτοῦμαι). Also Critias's summary of Timaeus's exordium is deceitful: he nowhere said that he was going to speak "about great matters" (περὶ μεγάλων) and nowhere demanded "indulgence" (συγγνώμη). He did, it is true, advise himself and his listeners to accept a merely likely account—providing it was no less likely than any other—on the grounds that accounts of mere likenesses can be no more than likely and that human beings cannot transcend this limitation on their powers of reason (29 B-D). But to call this a demand for his listeners' indulgence on the ground that he was going to discuss great matters is to twist advice and humility into begging and boasting, and principles of epistemology into tactics of oratory.

I admit that the request which I am about to make is exceedingly presumptuous and more churlish than is proper, but nevertheless it must be spoken.

How well Critias characterizes his request, and thereby himself! The request will indeed be presumptuous and churlish, among other reasons because at 107 E it becomes a demand—and deceitful too, as we shall see.

For that your discourse was not a good one, what man in his right mind would attempt to assert? However, that the things I am going to say, being more difficult than what you said, require more indulgence, this I must somehow attempt to show.

In the first of these sentences Critias further reveals his dis-

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2 In his exordium Timaeus never uses μέγαλος with reference to his subject matter; "μεγάλων" (27 C) and "μέγιστον" (29 B) do not refer to his subject. At 48 C he explicitly pleads the magnitude of a task as grounds not for indulgence from his audience but for his not undertaking it. Note, however, the subject of Critias's story, "πάντων ἐργῶν ἐν μέγιστον" (20 E) and "περὶ μεγίστης... πράξεως" (21 D), and its importance, "μέγιστον ἐργον" (26 A).

3 Cf. Phaedrus 260 D and Rep. 361 E where "more churlish [or harsher] than is proper" describes the speaker's attitude to something he detests.