Abstract

This paper proceeds from the idea that philosophical texts, given their ultimately transformative objectives, require of readers and auditors certain kinds of active engagement. As protreptic discourse, not only must these texts turn audiences away from conventional concerns and towards alternatives, but they must also be engaging in such a way as to help sustain the turn. In spite of ancient concerns about the limitations of writing and the dangers of engaging in certain kinds of spectacle, some of these texts suggest through the use of narrative devices that readers and spectators not merely theorize the dramatic maneuvers of philosophical dialogue but get involved with and experience, as only they themselves can, the struggles of philosophical conversion.

This paper offers a narratological study of Platonic dialogues and Isokratean discourse in order to suggest a more open view of textuality in early fourth-century philosophical practices. Rather than compositions that were intended to be read or observed in performance for the sake of interpretation, some of the Platonic dialogues and other philosophical texts of the fourth century set themselves up primarily as prompts for participation and supplemental departures. These texts prescribe or portray personal responses from audiences as the narratives which they contain are being performed. While narrated dialogues may begin as recollections of dramatic and philosophically important exchanges, they can abruptly become occasions for unscripted engagements. Bystanders are turned into respondents. Audiences are drawn into becoming performing participants. I shall demonstrate how some of Plato’s narrated dialogues (Phaedo, Euthydemus) model and privilege this sort of intrusion into reported events. Isokratean discourse models how a community collaborates to revise and supplement a text over time (Panathenaicus). This discourse can also go so far as to prescribe rather than merely model participation and supplementation (letters to young tyrants). In these examples, philosophical retellings become prompts for personal activity in the present. This dynamic, which is internal to these texts,

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suggests a different way of viewing the pragmatics of these texts in circulation and performance. Philosophical texts, like the interrupted and revised narratives they contain, may be better viewed as open scripts which invite special kinds of departure and improvisatory supplementation.

Philosophical texts make special demands of readers and audiences. They can suggest the adoption of alternative ways of thinking or living, alternative social circles and forms of communication. That is, they have an essential protreptic function and ultimately transformative objective: the alternative should not just be turned towards but embraced.¹ How do such texts aim to foster these transformations? How can texts or performances not only persuade a reader or audience to abandon conventional ways of living, but produce the conditions necessary to embrace the alternatives?² I begin with the proposition that this transformation requires special kinds of engagement with philosophical discourse—engagement that involves more than analytic faculties. In order to engage the imagination, belief, memory, emotion, ambition and passion, even the muscles of the body, philosophical discourse can prescribe or model immersive modes of engagement that turn readers, auditors, and spectators into participants.

The reader or auditor must bring something of himself into conversation with the text or performance, but these must first be open to conversation. On one occasion, Sokrates famously condemns writing of all kinds—the composed logoi of Lysias, the poetry of Homer, the politi-

¹ The transformative function of protreptic can be rather modest in comparison with the broader transformative objectives of philosophical discourse. E.g., Sokratean discourse astounds, possesses, and upsets Alkibiades, convinces him to turn away from his political ambitions and toward his own deficiencies; and yet when he leaves Sokrates’ side (and presumably when even a poor account of his discourse ends), he is once again overcome by the favors of the crowd (Symp.215d–216c). He is momentarily turned by protreptic but is not profoundly changed. Some suggest that this discourse could instantly leave a person like Aristippos weak but steadfastly incited, and thirsty for more (see below). In order for protreptic discourse to be transformative, engagement with it must be perhaps sustained or more profound.

² There are, of course, those who argue that some of these texts are merely protreptic and only suggestive of, or even in direct conflict with, esoteric, unwritten teachings. As far as Platonic dialogue and epistles are concerned, a mistrust of writing casts a shadow over texts and readings in the absence of the author (e.g., Ep.VII 341a–345c; cf. Isokrates, ad Dionysium 3); and we have ancient testimony of differences between Plato’s written and unwritten teachings (e.g., Physics 209b14–15; see M. Isnardi Parente [1997–1998], Testimonianza Platonica). Our study here does not concern unwritten doctrines but unscripted participation. These narratives model and present in performance opportunities for unscripted engagement.