THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY

Edited by Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca and Alice Lagaay

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

1

PERFORMANCES OF PHILOSOPHY IN ANCIENT GREECE AND IN MODERNITY

Suddenly a philosopher enters the stage

Ira Avneri and Freddie Rokem

The context

The basic facts are well known: Ancient Greece was the 'birthplace' of the discursive practices of both theater and philosophy. The more or less simultaneous composition of a large body of dramatic works and the emergence (with Socrates and Plato) of mature philosophical thought is a unique phenomenon. Developing through an intense dialogue, the two discursive practices were, however, also frequently in competition, at times even regarding each other with scorn and suspicion, initiating what is famously known as the 'ancient quarrel between philosophy and (dramatic) poetry'. Through their multi-leveled interactions, each discursive practice also integrated features of the other, either drawing attention to the philosophical aspects of dramatic writing and theater performances or to the dramaturgical and performative dimensions of philosophy.

We will begin with a brief presentation of two paradigmatic cases of such 'transgressions', with Oedipus as a philosophical dramatic character and Socrates as a performative philosopher. Then, we will examine in detail Socrates' performative philosophizing as depicted in his delayed entrance to Agathon's house in Plato's *Symposium*. And in closing, we will briefly discuss how certain aspects of the Socratic/Platonic legacy of philosophical performativity have reappeared in the work and thinking of Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht.

Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* (dated around 429 BCE) plays a double role in this context. First, it features a dramatic character who triumphantly takes on the role of the philosopher when solving the riddle of the Sphinx to define what a human being is.[1] Second, around 335 BCE, almost a century after it was written, the play served as the bedrock for Aristotle's *Poetics*. Composed at a time when the arts of playwriting and theatrical performances had deteriorated, the *Poetics* was the first philosophical text *about* drama/tragedy, rather than a philosophical drama of the kind that Plato had marvelously sketched in his dialogues.

It is important to note that *Oedipus Tyrannus* repeatedly emphasizes that Oedipus had solved the riddle of the Sphinx using his own intelligence, without any supernatural intervention. This riddle defines the human as a creature with *many* shifting legs (i.e. multiplicity and transformation) and a *single* voice (i.e. unity and sameness). In Platonic terms, this interaction between one and many is echoed in the dialectics between the eternal, pure Forms

and their many transient manifestations. In Aristotelian terms, however, the riddle of the Sphinx seems to violate one of the basic principles of logical thinking, the Principle of Non-contradiction, which later became the basis for the Law of Identity. As Aristotle claims in his *Metaphysics*, "the *same* attribute cannot at the *same* time belong and not belong to the *same* subject in the *same* respect" (1005b; our emphasis. Aristotle, 1984, p. 1588). However, in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, as Charles Segal has noted, "noncontradiction gives way to a fantastic, irrational 'logic' of paradoxes in which opposites can in fact be equal and 'one' can simultaneously be 'many'" (Segal 1999, p. 216. See also Rokem 2010, 2016).

As a 'prize' for solving this paradoxical riddle, Oedipus marries the widow-queen, his mother, thus becoming the ruler of Thebes and unwittingly fulfilling the second part of the Delphic prophecy. This alone is not sufficient to abolish the plague in Thebes. The plague, it is said, will only cease when the person who killed King Laius is found. The murderer turns out to be Oedipus himself, who, whilst knowing the universal identity of humans, fails to know his own identity as a singular subject, the *gnōthi seautón* ('know thyself') commanded by the Oracle.

The second paradigmatic case is Socrates, whose manner of philosophizing was often seen as theatrical – even in the eyes of Plato, his most ardent pupil. Socrates' philosophical mission was also directly related to the Delphic Oracle. As he himself argues in his defense-speech (in 399 BCE, as transmitted in Plato's *Apology*), the Oracle had disclosed to his longtime friend Chaerephon that there was no man wiser than Socrates. Upon hearing of it from Chaerephon, the perplexed Socrates, who until then had believed that he possessed no wisdom, began wandering about Athens to check its veracity by seeking someone who is wiser than him – in order, finally, to confirm that the Oracle is irrefutable (22a), a 'Popperian'-like logic of verification of a given assumption on the basis of unsuccessful attempts to refute it (*Apology*, 21e–22e).[2]

Socrates' response to the 'riddle' of the Oracle (as he terms it; 21b)[3] signaled his Oedipus-like insistence that the traditional methods of oracular interpretation must give way to rational inquiry, testing the veracity of divine pronouncements. But, as he began to question people who had made claims to wisdom, Socrates found out that he himself is indeed the wisest, for he is the only one who knows that he *does not know* (22d–23b), which – like the Cretan who claims that all Cretans are liars – is in itself paradoxical. As he tells it, he was unable to find even a single person who could grasp the notion of wisdom as knowledge of ignorance. While his interlocutors perceived themselves as knowledgeable when in fact they knew nothing, he himself was aware of his own ignorance and did not pretend to know anything apart from that (21c–d).

The *Symposium* – Plato's only dialogue named after the occasion for its plot – is the earliest known record of a philosopher engaging with the practices of theater. It presents a detailed report of the private banquet held in honor of Agathon's victory in the annual tragedy festival of *Lênaea*, presumably in 416 BCE. Arriving at the exclusive party with his admirer Aristodemus, Socrates eventually joins the group of prominent Athenian citizens, including the playwright Aristophanes whose comedy the *Clouds* (performed in 423 BCE; the earliest known text to mention Socrates) features a satiric, somewhat malicious depiction of Socrates' philosophical performance, which, according to Plato, has nourished the charges against Socrates (*Apology*, 18c–d, 19c). Gathered in the intimate setting of Agathon's house, they celebrate the playwright's victory in the tragedy competition by staging another competition, a playful contest (*agôn*) of speeches in praise of Eros – the divine, mythological personification of the human *erôs*.

However, this competition begins only after Socrates finally makes his entrance, concluding a long standstill outside the house (*Symposium*, 174d–175c). Through the interruptions,

first caused by his absence and the delay of his entrance and then by his presence and indoor actions, Socrates transforms the house of the dramatist into a stage (or 'home') for performing philosophy. When Alcibiades makes a sudden 'drunken' entrance, just after Socrates has completed his speech on Eros (based on Diotima's teachings – a sophisticated way of defending his own claim of ignorance), the discussion takes on new forms of theatricality, turning into a fierce and much less playful *agôn* between these two ex-lovers (212c ff.). Finally, at dawn, before leaving Agathon's house to spend the day in the baths and the market place, Socrates lectures the two playwrights – who are too tired to hear his arguments and fall asleep – that the same man could possess the knowledge required for composing both tragedies and comedies and that the man who can compose tragedies should be able to compose comedies as well (223c–d).

At a certain point, Aristodemus also falls asleep and misses most of the discussion epitomizing the *agôn* between the discursive practices of philosophy and dramatic poetry. As Aristodemus had realized in real-time and later told Apollodorus, the narrator of the dialogue, he had only heard the key points of Socrates' argument but could not remember most of what was said (223c–d). One possible interpretation of Socrates' early morning 'lecture' is that philosophy encompasses both dramatic genres, while the playwrights, who either compose tragedy or comedy but not both,[4] are incomplete, like the split two-legged humans searching for their missing half, according to the myth presented in Aristophanes' speech on Eros.

While Oedipus' employment of logical reasoning (which Aristotle regarded as the foundation for philosophy as well as for dramatic narratives) leads to the destruction of himself and his family, Socrates' performance of philosophy eventually serves as evidence in the trial that results in his death-sentence. Athens, Plato suggests, cannot be a home for Socratic philosophy. The philosophical performances of Oedipus and Socrates are thus the paradoxical expressions of a uniquely tragic spirit, combining triumph and downfall, which was cultivated during a short period in Classical Athens when the discursive practices of philosophy and performance were in competitive yet fruitful dialogue with each other.

Socrates' standstill

In Plato's works, Socrates' odd behavior is often denoted by the word *atopos*, or *atopia*, and its variants. Formed by the combination of the Alpha privative and the Greek word *topos* (meaning 'place', 'location', and sometimes also 'topic'), *atopia* is often translated as 'outlandishness' or 'strangeness'; yet literally, it signifies a quality of 'placelessness', an absence of 'normal' location, something that eludes categorization or a specified context (cf. Schlosser 2014, pp. 12, 142).[5] Socrates' *atopia* implies his unique stance in Athens as an outsider inside: he is a stranger to the traditional patterns of thought and behavior as well as to the common manner of expression; yet, he is no foreigner. His presence embodies the dialectics of familiarity and strangeness discussed in the Allegory of the Cave. "It's a strange image (*atopon eikona*) you're describing, and strange prisoners (*desmôtas atopous*)", Glaucon reacts to the account of the state of affairs inside the cave, to which Socrates replies: "They're like us" (*Republic*, 515a. Plato 1997, pp. 1132–1133).

The term *atopia* can define almost any philosophical model, since philosophy is, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's words, "never entirely within the world, yet never outside the world" (cf. Hadot 2002, p. 36). Still, there seems to be no philosopher more suitable to this term than Socrates. He is considered atopic not just in terms of his appearance and manners, but also in terms of his mode of thinking, his way of philosophizing, and his public practice of a private spatio-temporal logic that challenges the Athenian conventions of space and time.

The initial movement intrinsic to Socrates' atopic philosophizing is his idle wanderings, *systematically* examining people while strolling around in search of someone wiser than him. As he interprets the Oracle's reply, he is given a divine mission to examine himself and others (*Apology*, 28e–29a, 33c), in order to show the Athenians their ignorance through his knowledge of his own ignorance (29d–30a). Socrates' claim that the Oracle's reply is what has produced his philosophical quest identifies the beginning of philosophizing with wandering. Like the excursions of Walter Benjamin's *flâneur*, these wanderings are confined to, and associated with, a specific spatio-temporal urban environment: fifth-century BCE Athens in the case of Socrates, and nineteenth-century CE Paris in the case of the *flâneur*. Still, to Socrates, the city is above all its inhabitants: in his wanderings, he 'collected' *people* for the sake of conversation, and not the kind of crystallized experiences, neglected memories, and miniature objects that the *flâneur* collects in his excursions to flea-markets and half-hidden arcades.

As Silvia Montiglio has rightly pointed out, there is no philosophizing without wandering, the movement that activates the quest for wisdom, but the more advanced and even ideal Platonic posture for contemplation is a *static* one (Montiglio 2005, pp. 178–179). Wandering marks the initial shock experienced by the soul when 'falling' into the body; yet, the philosopher yearns for what is beyond movement, since according to Plato the ability to grasp the truth is limited to a stable position. From the *Phaedo*, we learn that when the soul detaches itself from the senses to inquire by itself, it sights the Invisible and the Intelligible (83a–b) and ascends to the realm of the Eternal. There, imitating the pure Forms, it ceases to move and remains stable. This condition of the soul is called 'wisdom' (79c–d).

Marking a movement toward transcendence, the vertical axis was part of the way Greek cosmology treated the space of the *polis*, a model whereby the human sphere (the horizontal axis) is located between the upper-world of the Olympus and the under-world of Hades (Wiles 1997, pp. 175–176). In Greek drama, the vertical is often related to an improper attempt to transcend the boundaries of the human sphere (and its tragic consequences), as exhibited in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. For Plato, however, it denotes the notion of ascent as the proper philosophical path, as exhibited in the movement up the Ladder of Love in the *Symposium* (as well as up and out of the cave in the *Republic*). Socrates employs a terminology of ascent to explain that through such movement, the philosophical lover frees himself from the contingency of mortal beauty in favor of a gaze at the pure form of Beauty (211a–b). While Aristophanes suggests that *erôs* moves the lovers on the horizontal axis, *toward each other*, Socrates suggests that *erôs* directs the (philosophical) lover *upward and beyond*, from pursuing the beauty of one particular body to a gaze at the Beautiful in itself – the pure, godlike Form of Beauty (Vernant 1990, pp. 470–473. See also Bloom, 1993, p. 484).

While the *Apology* depicts the initial stage of Socrates' philosophizing, acted out through his conversations with others as he wanders around on the horizontal axis, the *Symposium* depicts an advanced stage of that quest, acted out through Socrates' conversations with himself while standing still in solitude,[6] his body fixed immovably to one spot as his mind runs free, as if moving vertically up the Ladder of Love.[7] The first instance of this gesture, beginning while Socrates is on his way to Agathon's house, occurs in a neighbor's doorway (front porch). The narrative itself moves into the house, and the 'offstage' act is made present 'onstage' through Agathon's servant's report (175a–c).

The second instance, reported later in the dialogue by Alcibiades (220c–d), is said to have occurred about sixteen years earlier, when Socrates stood motionless for more than 24 hours during the Athenian expedition to Potidaea. Even if we know from other sources that long standstills were habitual for Socrates (e.g. in Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, 2:1:1–3), the only instances of this gesture in the entire corpus of Plato's works are those in the *Symposium*.

In the broader context of Plato's philosophy, standstill is identified with the retreat of the soul to the Intelligible (e.g. *Phaedrus*, 247b–c). Hence, it is fitting that this image is introduced (only) in the *Symposium*, a dialogue in which the retreat is manifested as a journey up the Ladder of Love, an inner movement in a static position, with Socrates himself as the philosopher engaged in this ascent (Montiglio 2005, p. 176).

The scenes in which he stands still in solitude, immersed in thoughts whose content is not reported to us, characterize Socrates as a perfect *erôtikos*, the lover of Wisdom and pure Beauty, who is essentially alone at the top of the Ladder of Love. Standstill – the metaphorical posture for temporarily withdrawing from the stream of life (*Republic*, 496d–e) – is a mark of physical, mental, and intellectual stamina, as well as of stepping out of time, coinciding with the image of the Platonic philosopher as gazing upon Eternity, e.g. in the *Symposium* (210a–212a) and the *Republic* (484b). Indeed, Socrates' most intense reflections occur when he performs this odd act, with his body held tight while his thoughts run free (Montiglio 2005, pp. 172–173).

In the *Symposium*, the drama that precedes the eulogies to Eros is designed as a theater of interruptions, exhibiting Socrates' *atopia*, and not by chance: Eros, like Socrates, is out-of-place. Although the door to Agathon's house stands open, awaiting the guests, and although the banquet has already begun (174d–e), Socrates refrains from entering, forcing his companion Aristodemus to enter alone in a party to which he was not invited in the first place. Socrates himself stands immobile in a neighbor's doorway. As the narrative reveals, this outdoor act steals the focus from the indoor event. The cause of the disturbance is not Socrates' presence but rather his absence, or more precisely, his atopic presence-through-absence. This dialectics of presence and absence is not just characteristic of Eros, oscillating between poverty and plenty, but can also be seen as structuring the phenomenology of desire itself (Halperin 1992, p. 101).

Unlike the Ionian soldiers at Potidaea, who do not try to interrupt Socrates' standstill and even take their bedding outside to get a better view of this spectacle, Agathon obsessively attempts to interfere with the standstill that occurs outside his house. He asks Aristodemus twice about Socrates' whereabouts (174e); orders his servant to go look for Socrates and bring him in (175a); and when he hears that Socrates is standing still nearby, ignoring requests to come inside, he tells his servant: "How odd (*atopon*). […] Call him again and keep on calling him" (175a. Plato 2008, p. 5). At that point, Aristodemus interferes and urges Agathon to leave Socrates alone: "This is one of his habits. Sometimes he turns aside and stands still wherever he happens to be. He will come in very soon, I think. Don't disturb (*kineite*, 'move') him" (175a–b, ibid.). Aristodemus may not know for certain that Socrates will enter, but he does know that Socrates must be allowed to enter in his own time, of his own free will – which indeed Socrates does, without any explanation, when the dinner is already halfway through (175c. Blondell 2006, pp. 149–151).

Writing about entrances and exits in Greek theater – a stage device which advances or arrests the dramatic action by regulating the presence and absence of characters – Oliver Taplin notes that in a good play, "each entrance and exit does not happen at random; it is put into a dramatic context in order to further artistic purposes which could not be served in any other way" (Taplin 1977, p. 67). Conforming to this theatrical logic, in Plato's dialogues, each entrance – especially Socrates' – furthers not just the drama but also the philosophical themes explored in them. The *Symposium* is a good example of this spatial dramaturgy, since Socrates' entrance into Agathon's house is preceded by an atopic display of his commitment to philosophy, evident both in the contemplative standstill itself and in his refusal to enter before concluding it. Performing this standstill in a neighbor's doorway – the typical place of the lover, according to Pausanias (183a), as well as of Eros himself, according to Diotima (203c–d) – Socrates is determined to enter only in his own time.

Socrates' entrance

Socrates' late entrance into Agathon's house is succeeded by two entrances which manifest a transition from 'high' philosophical *erôs* to 'low' bodily *erôs*: Alcibiades' entrance, immediately after Socrates' speech, when Aristophanes wants to protest against something that Socrates has said (212c); and the invasion by some revelers who take over and impose their own drinking rules on the diners, thereby bringing to the gradual dissolution of the party (223b). Here we will discuss only Socrates' entrance, foreshadowing Benjamin's discussion of the entrance as a form of philosophical interruption, as embodied in the image of the sudden appearance of a stranger - personifying philosophy - at a house-door (coinciding with the Greek conception of the stranger, *xênos*, as a *thuraios*, 'the one at/connected with the door'). In the *Symposium*, the notion of the 'sudden' (*exaiphnês*) is used to depict the other two entrances, but the ultimate strangers are Socrates and Diotima, his 'teacher' in the dialectics of *erôs*.[8] By initially refraining from entering Agathon's house in favor of a display of philosophizing; by sending Aristodemus to enter before him; by his own late entrance while the banquet-dinner is already halfway through; and finally by making Diotima enter the discussion through a reenactment of their conversations in his eulogy of Eros, Socrates initiates the transformation of the dramatist's house into a temporary home for performing philosophy. In the *Symposium*, this phrasing encompasses the two meanings of 'to perform': Socrates is both *doing* philosophy and *presenting a display* of philosophy.

The entrance of philosophy into the non-philosophical space of Agathon's house is already evident in the initial exchange between Socrates and the host, when the theme of ignorance vs. knowledge is introduced. When Socrates enters, Agathon invites him to his couch, adding in jest that through the bodily contact derived from lying one beside the other, he himself may acquire the piece of wisdom (*sophia*) that came into Socrates' mind in his standstill (175c-d). Socrates accepts the invitation, joining Agathon, yet dismisses the latter's playful-erotic remark by claiming – also in jest – that if wisdom were something that could flow through mere contact, from the one who is full to the one who is empty, he would value having the place beside Agathon so that his own inferior wisdom could be filled with Agathon's abundant wisdom, brilliantly displayed at the theater in front of more than thirty-thousand spectators (175d–e).

This is Socrates' third demonstrative rejection of Agathon. The first was his absence from the public celebration in honor of Agathon on the day before the private banquet, disclosing his tendency to avoid events that are, literally speaking, crowded (174a). The second was Socrates' behavior when arriving at the banquet, culminating in his self-absorbed yet publicly visible standstill. The fact that Socrates would stop somewhere to think is not something rare; yet, he challenged Agathon, both as a host and as a dramatist, by doing it in the theatrical way that he did, just outside the banquet (Rhodes 2003, pp. 199–202). Socrates' third rejection – that wisdom can flow from one person to another – is, however, not in total jest. In fact, a serious issue is at stake here: the transmission of knowledge and wisdom. *Haptesthai*, Agathon's verb for his proposal to touch Socrates, is the same verb later used by Diotima to denote the ability to grasp truth at the top of the Ladder of Love (212a).

As Andrea Wilson Nightingale has pointed out, a Platonic philosopher would necessarily reject such a proposal, since wisdom is not a good that resides in the bodily sphere of exchange, just as education is not an exchange of commodities (Nightingale 1995, pp. 47–48, 50). Plato's Socrates regards learning as a process of recollection, elicited from within with the help of a guide rather than imparted from the outside by a teacher. Perhaps exposing his own implicit critique of Socrates, Plato makes Agathon interpret these

rejections as provocations on Socrates' part. When Socrates claims that Agathon's wisdom is superior to his own, Agathon suspects him of *pretending* ignorance and accuses him of being *hybristês* (175e). Derived from the same root as *hybris*, *hybristês* is often translated as 'being sarcastic'; yet, it also denotes an outrageous and even violent behavior. Later, this charge is picked up by Alcibiades, who had not yet been present when Agathon voiced it. Like Agathon albeit from a different stance, Alcibiades stresses Socrates' false pretenses of being ignorant (216d–e) and of being a lover (222a–b). Both of them consider these pretenses to be an indication of hubris and Socrates' praise of others to express an ironical disguise for contempt. As Chris Emlyn-Jones rightly claims, in the *Symposium*, "the boundaries of the Socratic and the theatrical are presented at their most ambivalent" (Emlyn-Jones 2004, p. 403).

Probably both favoring and denouncing Socrates, Plato's description of his philosophical hero's performative behavior before and after entering Agathon's house suggests that Socrates plays to an audience no less than the playwrights do. This is evident first and foremost in his unusual apparel – bathed, shod, and fancily dressed (174a). To dress up like that is to prepare for a performance, because as Socrates tells Ion, rhapsodes are expected to be dressed up and to look as beautiful as possible for their contests (*Ion*, 530b). Suiting himself to the specific occasion and to the beauty of the host, Socrates has carefully planned his appearance in the *Symposium*. However, unlike Agathon's external, audience-dependent theatricality, Socrates' theatricality creates the impression of being directed inward, only indirectly aimed at an external audience. Nevertheless, his overall attitude bears the quality of a display. In the end, Socrates' *agôn* with Agathon is a contest between two skilled performers.

Benjamin and the aesthetics of thinking

Almost immediately after Benjamin and Brecht had become close friends in 1929 (cf. Wizisla 2009), Benjamin began theorizing the principles of Brecht's work. The first version of his essay "What is Epic Theatre?" was written in 1931 but was withheld, apparently for political reasons, after it had been accepted for publication in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, remaining unpublished during his lifetime (though a second, much shorter version, was published anonymously in 1939, about a year before he took his own life). In this text, Benjamin draws attention to one of the central features of Brecht's theater: the interruption (*Die Unterbrechung*), which "does not reproduce conditions but, rather, reveals them. This uncovering of conditions (*Entdeckung der Zustände*) is brought about through processes being interrupted" (Benjamin 1973, pp. 4–5).

What Benjamin terms the "very crude (*primitivste*) example" of an interruption is the sudden appearance of a stranger at a domestic scene of potential violence:

> The mother is just about to pick up a pillow [in the second version of the essay, a 'bronze statue'; I.A. and F.R.] to hurl at the daughter, the father is opening a window to call a policeman. At this moment a stranger appears at the door. 'Tableau', as they used to say around 1900 (*um 1900*).

Through such a *tableau*, Benjamin explains, "the stranger is suddenly confronted with certain conditions: rumpled bedclothes, an open window, a devastated interior"; not an unusual situation, he adds, because there are many bourgeois scenes that look exactly like this. According to Benjamin, the greater the devastations of the social order, "the more marked must

be the distance between the stranger and the events portrayed" (ibid., p. 5).[9] This, he argues, intensifies the interruption:

> The thing that is revealed as though by lightning in the 'condition' represented on the stage – as a copy of human gestures, actions and words – is an immanently dialectical attitude. The condition which epic theatre reveals is the dialectic at a standstill.
>
> *(Ibid., p. 12 with minor adjustments)*

This principle will also serve Benjamin to theorize our understanding of history. In the N-convolute ("On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress") of the *Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*), he expands the concept of dialectic at a standstill: "The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast – as an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability" (N9, 7. Benjamin 1999b, p. 473). The dialectical image, he explains, "is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill" (N3, 1. Ibid., p. 463).

In Benjamin's eyes, the interruption of the sequence of time is in fact what makes history truly historical – in keeping with the idea of a "present which is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand and has come to a standstill".[10] As in Plato's design of the atopic scenes in which Socrates stands immobile for an unspecified period of time, leisurely privatizing the public space, Benjamin's dialectics at a standstill crystallizes the arrest of an 'objective' flow, an image flashing up in the now of its 'recognizability' (in German, the word is *Erkennbarkeit*, which can also be translated as 'knowability'). It is a caesura in and of the spatio-temporal order; a gesture of interruption not just *in* time and *of* time but also *in* space and *of* space; or, in Benjamin's own words, discussing Brecht's theater, a "damming of the stream of real life (*Die Stauung im realen Lebensfluß*)" (Benjamin 1973, p. 13).[11] When the stream of life is brought to a sudden halt, the image is frozen under a lightning flash of truth. What was thought to be known appears as new in its strangeness: the familiar appears as unfamiliar, even *Unheimlich*, viewed through a demystified illumination and open to re-examination – in and through a constellation, where the situation becomes transformed into an image at a standstill.

Alongside this convergence, there is also a crucial difference between the two models. Socrates' dialectical standstills mark a tension *between* his body and his mind. As we have seen, his moments of external motionlessness are also his most intense moments of internal motion on the Ladder of Love. In his standstills, Socrates establishes his own 'private theatre' on the stage of the 'theatre of the world'. In the end, though, this 'theatre' and the performance of thinking staged in it are the cause and effect of each other, because Socrates' gesture of interrupting the stream is what sets the stage for a Socratic philosophy of interrupting the stream. In this process, the standstill is both a precondition and a result; it is the stage both for and of its own philosophical appearance.

Benjamin's Dialectics at a Standstill, however, marks a dialectics of motion and stasis *in the same thing*. This tension can appear in the realm of a body, as in the case of the angel of history (*Angelus Novus*) who is blown into the future by a storm we call 'progress', coming from Paradise, while he is fixedly contemplating the "one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet" (Benjamin 2003, p. 392).[12] But it can also appear in the realm of the mind, as evident in Benjamin's claim that thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts but their arrest (*Stillstellung*) as well (Benjamin 2003, p. 396). This transformation of the activity of thinking into a performative expression is even more explicit in the *Arcades Project*, in Benjamin's claim that "where thinking comes to a standstill

in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought" (Benjamin 1999b, Convolute N10a, 3, p. 475).

The opening sentence of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (published in 1928) provides such a caesura, exemplifying the dialectics of the image itself: "It is characteristic of philosophical writing that it must continually confront the question of representation (*Es ist dem philosophischen Schrifttum eigen, mit jeder Wendung von neuem vor der Frage der Darstellung zu stehen*)" (Benjamin 1998, p. 27). This sentence can even be seen as a self-reflexive staging of such a caesura in the medium of language, where 'philosophical writing' – which is the outcome of philosophical thinking – must 'with every turn' (*mit jeder Wendung*) literally 'face' the question of *Darstellung*. The word *Wendung* means both a bodily 'turn' in a certain direction, personifying the writing as a physical movement, through a *Wendung* of language, which also means its use of idioms and expressions.

This choreography (the 'bodily writing') of thought, enabling the philosopher to 'turn' toward *Darstellung* through language and contemplation, recalls Plato's Allegory of the Cave, where turning around is an image for philosophical pedagogy. The prisoners in the cave are chained so that they can see nothing but the flickering shadows of illusions on the wall in front of them and are prevented from turning their heads. But at a certain point one of them is mysteriously released from his chains; someone or something *compels* him to stand up, turn around, and walk toward the fire that burns far above and behind them (*Republic*, 514a–515c). The first step of the ascent from the cave is an act of turning around (*periagein*), exemplifying a dialectics of compulsion and freedom.[13]

In Benjamin's model, however, we are free from the outset to turn in every direction, to face *Darstellung* – a term which can be translated both as 'presentation' and 'representation' (and is actually positioned between them) – evoking a state for showing as well as making something visible in the liminal space where philosophy and performance overlap and interact. Benjamin's thesis on the German Mourning Play, which opens with the above-mentioned reflection, staging the caesura of thinking itself, is based on the assumption that "as essences, truth and idea acquire that supreme metaphysical significance expressly attributed to them in the Platonic system". And this, Benjamin adds in the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" of his book,

> is evident above all in the *Symposium*, which contains two pronouncements of decisive importance […]. It presents truth – the realm of ideas – as the essential content of beauty. It declares truth to be beautiful. An understanding of the Platonic view of truth and beauty is not just a primary aim in every investigation into the philosophy of art, but it is indispensable to the definition of truth itself.
>
> *(Benjamin 1998, p. 30)*

Brecht and the appearance of the thinking man

During the years 1929 to 1933, before Benjamin and Brecht were forced to leave Germany after the Nazi takeover of power, Brecht explored new forms of artistic expression in a broad range of *Lehrstücke*, 'Learning Plays'. Reflecting Brecht's Marxist-materialist approach, the *Lehrstücke* expose sharp ideological conflicts through fundamental social, economic, and legal paradoxes and injustices, simultaneously using a wide range of meta-performative devices, as well as more direct forms of audience participation. And perhaps most strikingly in this context, Brecht included a broad range of figures defined as thinkers or philosophers who enter, like Herr Keuner (often referred to as Herr K., as in two of Kafka's novels which abound in interrupting strangers) as well as in the short dramatic fragment "Nothing comes from Nothing" (*Aus Nichts wird Nichts*) and the much more extensive *Fatzer* materials.

Herr Keuner, Brecht's 'thinking man', is a trickster-figure reacting cynically to seemingly simple everyday situations: "'What are you working on?' Herr K. was asked. Herr K. replied: 'I'm having a hard time; I'm preparing my next mistake'" (Brecht 2001, p. 7). Treating Keuner as the prototype for the suddenly appearing stranger-philosopher, Benjamin suggests that the name *Keuner* combines two 'etymologies' rooted in the Ancient world. The first is

> based on the Greek root *koinôs* – the universal, that which concerns all, belongs to all. And in fact, Herr Keuner is the man who concerns all, belongs to all, for he is the leader. But in quite a different sense from the one we usually understand by the word. […] His main preoccupations lie light-years away from what people nowadays understand to be those of a 'leader'. The fact is that Herr Keuner is a thinker.[14]

Benjamin's second 'etymology' from "What is Epic Theatre? [First Version]" sees *Keuner* as a Swabian *outis*, a metamorphosis of Ulysses. Just as Ulysses is "the Greek 'Nobody' who visits one-eyed Polyphemus in his cave", Keuner challenges the monster called 'class-society'. This 'Nobody' is actually a Swabian stranger, since in Brecht's home-dialect, the German word for nobody – *keiner* – is pronounced as *keuner.* To this, Benjamin adds that unlike Ulysses,

> Keuner never leaves the threshold of his house at all. He likes the trees which he sees in the yard when he comes out of his fourth-floor tenement flat. 'Why don't you ever go into the woods,' ask his friends, 'if you like trees so much?' 'Did I not tell you,' replies Herr Keuner, 'that I like the trees in my yard?' To move this thinking man, Herr Keuner (who, Brecht once suggested, should be carried on stage lying down, so little is he drawn thither), to move him to existence upon the stage – that is the aim of this new theatre.
>
> *(Benjamin 1973, p. 5 with minor adjustments)*

During the years of exile as well as after his return to Berlin at the end of World War II, Brecht was periodically also working on the *Messingkauf Dialogues*, depicting the conversations of a philosopher who "has come to a large theatre after the performance has finished, to talk with the theatre people. He has been invited by an actress" (Brecht 2014, p. 11). In these dialogues, which were never completed during Brecht's lifetime, the philosopher arrives at the theater – the 'home' of performance for many generations. His discussions with the dramaturg, an actor, an actress, and a backstage worker (variously referred to in the text as the lighting technician, the stage hand or the worker) are going to take place on the stage itself, during four nights, after the evening's show, in the form of a Socratic dialogue.

In these fragments, Brecht touches on a number of topics relating to how the philosopher conceives the theater, and in particular, as the latter says:

> The fact that you apply your art and your whole apparatus to imitating incidents that occur between people, making your spectators feel as though they're watching real life. Because I'm interested in the way people live together (*das Zusammenleben der Menschen*), I'm interested in your imitations of it too.
>
> *(Ibid., p. 13)*

The philosopher is barely interested in the art of theater in itself – he does not value it much, and is unfamiliar with its vocabulary (e.g. 'the fourth wall') – yet, he does have a basic sense of what he is looking for, comparing himself "to a man who, let's say, deals in scrap metal, and goes to see a brass band wanting to buy not a trumpet or any other instrument, but

simply brass" (ibid., p. 17). Just like the scrap-metal dealer wants to buy the musical instruments not because of their artistic value but because of their commercial value as metal, so the philosopher is interested in the possibility of 'melting down' the apparatus of the theater (the musical instruments) and 'molding' it, as raw-metal (the brass), for his own 'scientific' purposes:

> I am approaching you in my search for incidents between people - which you do imitate here in some way. […] I've heard that you manufacture such imitations; and now I'm hoping to find out whether they are the kind of imitations I can use.
>
> *(Ibid.)*

Brecht's philosopher explores the materiality of the theater – what it is made of – with those who work there. His disruptive quality seems to be embodied less in his way of turning the theatre stage into a site for philosophical reflection, and more with the kind of materialist philosophy he advances. At the same time as this is an interruption of the practitioners habitual modes of working – which they clearly resist – it also opens up possibilities for restructuring their work for a theater of the future, a philosophical theater, which the philosopher proposes to call *Thaëter.* As Brecht claimed, on another occasion, "the future of the theatre is a philosophical one".[15]

In Benjamin's diary entry from July 24, 1934, during his first visit to Brecht's exilic home in Svendborg on the island of Fyn in Denmark, he remarks that on a horizontal beam in Brecht's study, there is a painted inscription 'saying' that "The truth is concrete (*Die Wahrheit ist konkret*)". Facing the beam, standing on the window ledge, is a wooden donkey that can nod its head; and "Brecht has hung a little notice round its neck with the words: 'I, too, must understand it (*Auch ich muss es verstehen*)".[16] The domestic performance that Brecht has staged in his study presents an ongoing dialogue between two inscriptions facing each other, one about the concreteness of truth (its materiality as opposed to an abstract, universal truth), on the beam, and the other, the donkey's agreement, on the note hanging around its neck. This performance consists of two inscriptions which are activated every time Brecht and Benjamin enter the study, witnessing the silent interaction between the beam and the donkey, interrupting the frozen communication which transforms the study into a home for both philosophy and performance, unified in an image at a standstill – a *tableau*, as we still sometimes say…

Notes

1 The full text of the riddle, and the answer:

> Riddle: There is on earth a creature with two legs, four legs and one voice, three legs too. Alone it changes in form of creatures who exist on earth, in air, on sea. But when it goes resting on more feet then the strength of its limbs is weaker.
> Answer: Listen, like it or not, ill winged songstress of death to my voice, which will end your folly. You mean a human, who crawling on the ground at first is four footed, a babe from the womb then in old age leans on a stick as third foot, with a burden on back, bent double in old age.
>
> *(Quoted from: Euripides 1988, p. 61)*

2 Namely, after Karl R. Popper's famous model of verification, as presented in the essay "Science: Conjectures and Refutations" (in Popper 1963, pp. 43–86). The question as to what extent in searching for someone who is wiser than himself the challenge to the Oracle is disrespectful to the gods (in this case Apollo) would call for further discussion.

3 Socrates treats the Oracle's reply as a riddle (*ainigma*) presented by the god, intertwining two questions: 'Who is Socrates?' and 'What is wisdom?' See Howland 2006, pp. 66–67.

4 According to Oliver Taplin, "[…] though we know of well over 100 fifth-century [BCE] playwrights, we do not know of a single one who produced both tragedy and comedy"; Taplin 1986, p. 163.
5 As Jacques Lacan writes, "*atopos* refers to a case that is unclassifiable or unsuitable. *Atopia*, you cannot put it anywhere"; Lacan 2015, p. 103.
6 In Plato's works, one's private thoughts are depicted as a conversation of one's soul with itself (e.g. in the *Sophist*, 263e–264b; *Theaetetus*, 189e–190a). See Denyer 2008, p. 79.
7 The Ladder of Love is a vertical image, but the ascent to its top is not an absolutely vertical journey. At least on two of the six rungs, the lover's movement partially involves a horizontal dimension as well, understood in terms of generalization. Ruby Blondell suggests that instead of a ladder, we should think here of a *staircase*; Blondell 2006, pp. 147n2, 151.
8 Diotima, just like Socrates (and Eros), is an outsider: (1) she 'speaks' at a banquet at which she herself is not present; (2) she is introduced as a female voice into the men's space; and (3) she is regarded as a stranger in Athens even after helping to delay the plague for about a decade (201d–e).
9 There is curiously no example of such a scene, neither in Brecht's plays, nor – it seems – in any contemporary dramatic work. Judith Butler notes that it is "apparently drawn not from a play, but from a daydream, perhaps"; Butler 2015, p. 39.
10 Quoted from Benjamins' essay "On the Concept of History" (often referred to as "Theses on the Philosophy of History"), in Benjamin 2003, p. 396.
11 As Rebecca Comay puts it, "time here undergoes its own peculiar shattering: a fissure erupts within the continuum of experience"; Comay 2005, p. 95.
12 In the context of the difference between Socrates' and the angel's dialectics of motion and stasis, one can recall Giorgio Agamben's comment that those who see the angel of history as a melancholic figure (e.g. Gershom Scholem) "would therefore most likely be horrified to witness what would happen if the angel, instead of being driven forward by the winds of progress, paused to accomplish his work"; Agamben 1999, p. 154.
13 "The logic at work here is this: to be freed is to be compelled to turn", A.J. Bartlett writes, alluding to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's claim that the 'general will' forces us to be free; Bartlett 2011, p. 119.
14 As Benjamin suggested in a radio-talk about Brecht, broadcast in the *Frankfurter Rundfunk* in June 1930. Quoted from Benjamin 1999a, p. 367.
15 This is a quote from "Latest Stage: Oedipus", the newspaper review Brecht wrote of Leopold Jessner's production of *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonnus*, which premiered at the Berlin Staatstheater in January 1925. Brecht's future wife, Helene Weigel, played Jocasta's maid in this production. Quoted from Brecht 2015, p. 43.
16 Quoted from Benjamin's "Notes from Svendborg: Summer 1934", in Benjamin 1999a, p. 785.

References

Agamben, Giorgio. 1999. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, edited and translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Aristotle. 1984. "Metaphysics", translated by W.D. Ross, in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, Vol. 2, pp. 1552–1728.
Bartlett, A. J. 2011. *Badiou and Plato: An Education by Truths*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Benjamin, Walter. 1973. "What Is Epic Theatre? [First Version]", in: *Understanding Brecht*, translated by Anna Bostock, London: Verso, pp. 1–13.
Benjamin, Walter. 1998 (1977). *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by John Osborne, London and New York: Verso.
Benjamin, Walter. 1999a. *Selected Writings*, *Vol. 2: 1927–1934,* edited by Michael W. Jennings et al., Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
Benjamin, Walter. 1999b. *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
Benjamin, Walter. 2003. *Selected Writings*, *Vol. 4: 1938–1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
Blondell, Ruby. 2006. "Where Is Socrates on the 'Ladder of Love'?", in: *Plato's* Symposium: *Issues in Interpretation and Reception* (*Hellenic Studies 22*), edited by James H. Lesher et al., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 147–178.
Bloom, Allan. 1993. "The Ladder of Love", in: Allan Bloom: *Love and Friendship*, New York: Simon & Schuster, pp. 429–546.

Brecht, Bertolt. 2001. *Stories of Mr. Keuner*, translated by Martin Chalmers, San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books.
Brecht, Bertolt. 2014. *Brecht on Performance: Messingkauf and Modelbooks*, edited by Tom Kuhn, Steve Giles, and Marc Silberman, London: Bloomsbury.
Brecht, Bertolt. 2015. *Brecht on Theatre*, edited by Marc Silberman et al., London: Bloomsbury.
Butler, Judith. 2015. "*Theatrical Machines*", *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp. 23–42.
Comay, Rebecca. 2005. "The Sickness of Tradition: Between Melancholia and Fetishism," in: *Walter Benjamin and History*, edited by Andrew Benjamin, London and New York: Continuum, pp. 88–101.
Denyer, Nicholas (ed.). 2008. *Plato: Protagoras*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Emlyn-Jones, Chris. 2004. "The Dramatic Poet and His Audience: Agathon and Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*", in: *Hermes: Zeitschrift für klassische Philologie*, 132. Jahrgang, Heft 4, pp. 389–405.
Euripides. 1988. *Phoenician Women*, translated by Elizabeth Craik, Wiltshire: Aris and Phillips.
Hadot, Pierre. 2002. *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* translated by Michael Chase, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
Halperin, David M. 1992. "Plato and the Erotics of Narrativity," in: *Methods of Interpreting Plato and His Dialogues* (Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, Supplementary Volume), edited by James C. Klagge, Nicholas D. Smith, pp. 93–129.
Howland, Jacob. 2006. *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Philosophy and Faith*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Lacan, Jacques. 2015. *Transference* (*The Seminars of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII*), translated by Bruce Fink, Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press.
Montiglio, Silvia. 2005. *Wandering in Ancient Greek Culture*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
Nightingale, Andrea Wilson. 1995. *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Plato. 1997. "Republic", translated by G.M.A. Grube (and revised by C.D.C. Reeve), in: *Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, pp. 971–1223.
Plato. 2008. *The Symposium*, translated by M.C. Howatson, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
Popper, Karl. 1963. *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
Rhodes, James M. 2003. *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence: Plato's Erotic Dialogues*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
Rokem, Freddie. 2010. *Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Rokem, Freddie. 2016. "The Ludic Logic of Tragedy", *Performance Research*, Vol. 21, Issue 4, pp. 26–33.
Schlosser, Joel Alden. 2014. *What Would Socrates Do? Self-Examination, Civic Engagement, and the Politics of Philosophy*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
Segal, Charles. 1999. *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
Taplin, Oliver. 1977. *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in the Greek Drama*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Taplin, Oliver. 1986, November. "Fifth-Century Tragedy and Comedy: A *Synkrisis*", *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 106, pp. 163–174.
Vernant, Jean-Pierre. 1990. "One… Two… Three: *Erôs*", in: *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, edited by David M. Halperin et al., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 465–478.
Wiles, David. 1997. *Tragedy in Athens: Performance Space and Theatrical Meaning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Wizisla, Erdmut. 2009. *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht – The Story of a Friendship*, translated by Christine Shuttleworth, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.