

DMITRI NIKULIN
New School for Social Research
New York

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WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH FORM? LOSS AND GAIN IN PLURIVOCAL SPEECH

Abstract: This article considers the apparent loss of form in modern philosophy and traces various ways throughout history in which form was utilized: in ontology, geometry and aesthetics. The paper argues that with the opposition of a univocal ontological form (of being) to a plurivocal logical form (of meaning), there was already an attempt in antiquity to escape ambiguity by carefully distinguishing between the various meanings of a term. Eventually, this process may lead to the emergence of a new form that is discussed with reference to the example of a literary genre, namely that of dialogue.*

It is said that contemporaneity does not have or has lost form. Who says this? “It is said,” i.e., “one says,” “*on dit*,” “*man sagt*”—a *Man* who depersonates any judgment, and who, in so doing, always misjudges “that which is the case”. Yet, this anonymous *Man*, the “one,” himself formless, ultimately cannot say much about form, including its possible loss. Where is form lost? In various forms of human activity, such as art, literature, philosophy, manners, communication, handwriting, dressing and so on, which means that human *praxis* does not have particular, well-defined forms any more.

It seems, however, that there is something paradoxical in the statement about the loss of form, because, first, to say that a form has vanished from various forms of human activity is already to refer to form, which, however, has presumably been lost. The paradox of the lost form consists in that, if it has been lost, then one must have had it, and thus one is capable of identifying the lost *qua* lost, i.e., as form. If, however, a form can still be identified as such, then in its very absence it is not altogether lost. Therefore, it seems that if a form is in fact lost, it cannot be spoken about, not even remembered, and definitely it cannot be identified as such.

One might say, perhaps, that a form is not altogether lost, but that it is broken, i.e., that what is lost is the singular and unique

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“*forma onmium formarum*,”¹ but that a form remains differentiated and present in a great variety of its appearances, such as various aesthetic, communicative, moral, natural, logical and ontological phenomena and events. But if a form is many and is incommensurable with other forms, then it is not *the* form, which, presumably, is unique while it nevertheless uninterruptedly communicates with other forms that are equally self-sufficient, i.e., being what it is, form is not reducible to a mere functional relation.

What is form, after all? Maybe it is only a historical or cultural misconception, and there has never been any form in either art or nature, and hence the complaint that form is lost arises from a misunderstanding and from false expectations. Moreover, if form is lost, even paradoxically so, then why has it been lost? Originally, the Latin *forma* translates the Greek *eidos*. *Eidos* is a “sight,” and as such, it suggests that what is seen is referred to as “what is,” as a given that either transcends the natural (in Plato) or is immanent to it (in Aristotle).² *Forma*, however, semantically already betrays this simple meaning by being a derivative of *formo*, which indicates an active forming, an arranging, bringing up, cultivating and tuning. But *eidos* does not simply mean ‘forming’ in this way; rather, it models a thing as an object that does not yet exist, that is not and never will be, but that always already means and wants to be. *Eidos* gives being, and is itself a gift. Thus, the mere unexplainable wonder of form as that which is given is already expelled and substituted by something else in an act of forming, an act of production, which implies the *verum factum*, i.e., that the true is true only insofar as and to the extent that it is produced, e.g., by an act of thinking.

Already in antiquity, however, the notion of form is far from being unified in the sense of being univocally understood, unambiguously used, and universally defined. Form is simultaneously present in many hypostases. If form refers to Plato’s *idea* or *eidos*, it not only signifies the unalloyed being that is set apart from becoming, but also *is* being; as such, it makes that which is otherwise fluent (and which has a particular form by “participating” in that form) *what* that thing is.³ In this sense, form *is* being, unchanging, one but at the same

¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *De docta ignorantia* II 2.

² Hans Jonas defends the “nobility of sight” against Heidegger’s “hearing” and H. Arendt’s “tasting.” Sight for Jonas provides the possibility of objectivity as distancing, of an active attitude (unlike in hearing) toward the object, and hence of theoretical truth. H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life. Towards a Philosophical Biology*. New York, 1966, pp. 136–47.

³ Plato, *Meno* 72 c; *Crat.* 439 e; *RP* 596 a sqq.; *Parm.* 128 e sqq. et al.

time one of many, simple, self-identical, immaterial, only thinkable, transcending the bodily and physical, definite (hence finite)⁴ and defining (hence, an end in itself). Since form is definite, it is also independent of other forms, i.e., it does not need other forms in order to exist, although it communicates with them, i.e., it is related to other forms but does not receive its definiteness from a mere relation within a community of forms. Such form, however, is already called into question during Plato's lifetime by his best student, and might thus be said not to exist outside of a strong Platonic realism. If fourteenth-century nominalism, in turn, with its stress on the role of will in cognition, and with its interest in semantics, is modern, then the ontological 'form-being' might be said, if not to have disappeared, then at least to have been called into question quite some time ago, in which case its loss would not be a specifically contemporary phenomenon.

In contemporary usage, which to a large extent seems to coincide with that of Kant, form is either said to be form of the beautiful (in the *Critique of Judgment*) or the logical form (in the *Critique of Pure Reason*). The former appears to be of an odd kind, because it alone, apart from any material content, is the form of purposiveness of a thing that is apprehended without any purpose.⁵ Such a form of the beautiful has nothing to do with the unseen *eidos*, which is the beautiful in itself as it is seen through its imitations, and which is thus the *eidos* that accounts for the beautiful in natural things. As Adorno observes, the utter strangeness of teleology without teleology as that which accounts for the beautiful in nature makes everyone after Kant, beginning with Schelling's *Philosophy of Art*, associate the beautiful solely with the artificial. In ancient aesthetics, the beautiful is first of all formal, and second, it is imitative of nature.⁶ However, if nature is not simply 'there', but is also the object of (perhaps an implicit) construction of and by our cognitive faculties and the activity of reasoning, then the notion of the beautiful in nature does not have any meaning. If the artificial in any way implies the imitation of nature, the imitation of "what is," then with the loss of the natural the artificial inevitably lacks the beautiful, and correspondingly, it is dissociated from any form.

⁴ From Plato's point of view, Cusanus' "una infinita forma" (Nicholas of Cusa, *De docta ignorantia* II 2) is a *contradictio in adiecto*. It is, perhaps, the endeavor of bringing actual (negative or divine) infinity into (the originally finite) being, and thus making it one, that historically causes the downfall of the form.

⁵ "Schönheit ist Form der Zweckmässigkeit eines Gegenstandes, sofern sie, ohne Vorstellung eines Zwecks, an ihm wahrgenommen wird." I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, B 61.

⁶ [H]ē tekhnē mimeitai tēn physin." Aristotle, *Phys.* 194 a 21-2.

If form is itself not an imitation of either that which is natural or of that which is artificial, and if it cannot be sensually represented, then it may abide as an imaginary *skhēma*,⁷ an outline or a contour, which, while invisible to the sense of sight, is also visible insofar as it is accessible to an “inner gaze” of the mind, i.e., depicted by and drawn in the imagination. The formal “scheme” of a figure is a geometrical figure, which is a geometrical shape and thus remains what it is; it is identical to itself (i.e., precise) and true to its definition (i.e., to the way in which it is defined and constructed). Not in the world of nature, but in the world of imagination, the straight line is always straight, the circle is always perfectly circular, and the square has all right angles.⁸ Nevertheless, the unshakeable and univocal identity of each figure is blurred with the acceptance of the infinite into strict scientific reasoning *more geometrico*. From the point of view of Desargues’ projective geometry, there is no major difference between the infinite straight line and the infinite circle. In infinity, as both Nicholas of Cusa and Newton put it,⁹ a figure can coincide, and in fact does coincide, with another one, so that its specific properties are either lost or radically redefined. Thus, the straight line coincides with the triangle and the sphere, e.g., the sum of the angles in a triangle with one infinitely removed vertex is more than 2π , etc. For contemporary topology, there is no significant difference between a triangle, a circle and a polygon, because each one can be smoothly transformed into the other, and thus each loses its form as definitional. The geometrical form that is not preserved and does not define a figure in its being is neither an *eidos* which makes a figure what it is, which is representable as such and as that which is identical in and to imagination, nor is it a *logos*, which is a definition that univocally describes what the figure is in accordance with the way in which it is depicted in and by the imagination.

Contrary to the form of being, the logical form is not a form that can be apprehended or thought in one single act, such as the simultaneous act of seeing or even imagining. The logical form is present in *discursive* reasoning, i.e., reasoning that unwraps and develops itself into a well- (or ill-) formed argument, step by step, proceeding from self-evident premises according to a certain and correct order of deduction up to a necessarily acceptable conclusion.

⁷ Cp. Plato, *Meno* 73 e.

⁸ Cp. D. Nikulin, *Matter, Imagination, and Geometry. Ontology, Natural Philosophy, and Mathematics in Plotinus, Proclus, and Descartes*. Aldershot, 2002. pp. 127 sqq. et passim.

⁹ Cp. Nicholas of Cusa, *De docta ignorantia* I 10 sqq.

In this sense, the logical form is not a form of *eidos*, but is rather that which involves the deployment of speech in a formally ordered sequence of reasoning, i.e., a deployment of a *logos*. It pertains, not to *being*, i.e., to *that* and *what* a thing is or is to be, but rather to an *ordering* or an ordered representation.

This move is quite clear in both Kant and the Neokantians, to whom much of recent philosophy returns either in continuation, or in reaction. For Kant and the Neokantians, the logical form turns out to be a pure *function* or *relation* which expels and substitutes the substantial form. In terms of Greek philosophy, this implies that the *logos* should fully substitute the *eidos*. The substantial form is that of being, which is a substance, and which is presumably independent and self-reliant. In order to define what a thing is, one has to describe it or set it up in its possible relations to other things, which themselves equally are, and which arise both through and as a result of such functional definition. The thing as such is secondary (there is either no “as such,” or it is unknown *qua* substance, e.g., in Locke and Kant), the relation is primary. From this perspective, a human does not exist *per se*, there is no such entity as a man: the human is what results from a (dys-)functional whole, from innumerable links and ties within the *socium*, the family, the body, language, history, etc., each of which is equally as much a complex functional setting.

Thus, it is primarily the logical functional form that appears to compete with and drive out the form of being, not only in ontology, but also in epistemology: to know something as true is to be able to establish it in an argument, i.e., to be able to demonstrate it *qua* and within a proposition. And to demonstrate a proposition is to show its consistency in a reasonably ordered form with clearly established and discernible parts. Thus, as Proclus explains it in his commentary to the first book of Euclid’s *Elements*, the mathematical (geometrical) proposition (which remains the paradigm of precision for the exposition of truth throughout modernity, e.g., in Descartes) has the following parts that must follow in this precise order: enunciation (*protasis*), exposition (*ekthesis*), determination (*diorismos*), construction (*kataskeyē*), demonstration (*apodeixis*), and conclusion (*symperasma*).¹⁰ Although without some of these parts, namely those of enunciation, proof and conclusion, no proposition would be complete, and thus could not be considered to have obtained or produced any knowledge,

¹⁰ Proclus, *In Eucl.* 203, 1 – 205, 12. Cp. Euclid, *The Thirteen Books of the Elements*. Translation with Introduction and Commentary by Th. L. Heath. Vol. I–III. New York, 1956. Vol. I, p. 129–31.

still, the prescriptive scheme of reasoning is rarely met in its entirety. Needless to say, Euclid and Proclus themselves hardly ever follow the precise and full form as it is envisaged and outlined according to the *logos* of demonstration.

The logical form, or *logos*, unlike the ontological form, or *eidos*, is not given in its entirety, but is present at a given moment, according to which it takes on the appropriate appearance. The logical form thus presupposes various and multiple constituents, which fit the discursivity of logical thinking, and which need to be arranged according to a certain order and due measure, and not be mixed up. The inner “logic” of such form has to be respected if one is to reach any valid conclusion. Hence the importance of *method* in reasoning for modern philosophy, which, beginning with Descartes¹¹ and culminating in the Neokantians and Positivists, expels the “scholastic” ontological form that it considers unknowable in principle, unnecessary and obsolete, and attempts to establish philosophy solely as method: universal, mathematics-oriented and logically strict.

There are, however, a number of logical forms the taxonomy of which modern thinkers, from Bacon to Hegel, try to establish as unique and necessarily acceptable. The problem, with the form taken as *logos*, is that, discursive and variegated, it nevertheless tends to multiply and proliferate itself, thereby dividing a form of reasoning into many different forms. If the ultimate logization of thinking fails, which is paralleled in the failure to present the discipline that traditionally provides the standard of rigor and strictness in reasoning, namely mathematics, as a branch of logic, then one might wonder whether or not a definite classification of all logical forms is ultimately possible, i.e., whether or not it is possible to provide a singular account for all of the (correct) ways of reasoning in their numerous branches and mutual relations.

That the *logos* is the most precise instrument, *organon*, of thinking and reasoning, but that it can nevertheless be treacherously ambiguous in its duality, was well known in antiquity. The struggle against ambiguity appears to be the constitutive “form” of the *via moderna*, not only in the late middle ages and early modernity,¹² but already in ancient Sophistry as well, which is perhaps the first truly modern movement to stress the autonomy of the inquisitive subject and the importance of procedural justification as that which is

¹¹ R. Descartes, *Reg.* IV, AT X, 376 sqq.; *Disc.* III, AT VI, 29.

¹² Cp. A. Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination. From the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*. Princeton, 1986, *passim*.

primarily present in scientific investigation. Since the logical form always turns out to be increasingly distinguishable, and thus plural, i.e., increasingly multipliable and reproducible, one needs to make univocal distinctions in order to avoid the perplexity of ambiguity.

Simply put, one has to discern between the various meanings of the same *logos*: any failure to make proper distinctions leads to confusion. Plato provides many examples of formally correct arguments which are nevertheless perplexed in their conclusion because they are initially based on ambiguous terms. Thus, the Sophist Dionysodorus in Plato's *Euthydemus* argues that, if the good is to be had everywhere and gold is good, then gold, *qua* good, is to be had everywhere, particularly in one's own body.¹³ On the contrary, making the proper distinctions between meanings in speech and argument, i.e., in *logos*, allows for a clear and distinct understanding of "what is." The straightforward and unambiguous syllogistic reasoning can, supposedly, thereby get rid of any unsound conclusions and poor judgments, and can therefore guarantee a systematic and methodic access to truth.

Thus, *logos* can be both perplexing and perplexed, because a word can be *used* or *said* in many different ways. Since, as it seems, there is no method or *a priori* reason according to which one might account for a given term's precise and *finite* number of meanings, i.e., for *all* the meanings of a term, then one cannot tell in advance how a word will appear and what it will turn out to mean. The Sophistic criticism exercises a great pressure on the word, on speech, and on *logos*, trying to turn the *logos* into whatever the speaker wants and intends it to be, and to make the weakest speech the strongest, i.e., the most persuasive.¹⁴ Hence, the program of saving the form *qua logos* from deliberate manipulation and misuse is marked by Aristotle's phrase as "*legetai pollakhōs*," "it is said in many ways."¹⁵ If we are to understand something, to produce a viable support for the point we are trying to establish and not to get derailed by a sophistic trick that blurs our reasoning, then we have to begin by making careful distinctions. In order to make sure that we use the terms in the same way, we need to enumerate—to produce a list—of all the possible and distinct uses of a word available to us. Thus, when Aristotle discusses

¹³ Plato, *Euthydem.* 299 d-e.

¹⁴ "[T]on hēttō...logon kreittō poiein." Protagoras B 6 b DK (cit. ap. Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1402 a 23).

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Phys.* 185 a 21 (*pollakhōs legetai to on*); *Met.* 1003 a 33 (*to de on legetai men pollakhōs*).

nature, he needs to name all the different meanings of the term; when he discusses substance, he goes through all the possible meanings available to him. In the *Metaphysics*, he dedicates a special book (Book Δ), which is a *sui generis* philosophical dictionary, to settling his account by providing a plurivocity of special terms: “being” (*to on*) is used in four different ways, “nature” (*physis*) is used in six different ways, and “substance” (*ousia*) is used also in four different ways, all of which are briefly mentioned and defined.¹⁶

Aristotle, however, is not the first to formulate a program for careful distinctions between meanings. It is Prodicus to whom the immediate tradition ascribes the introduction of such a project. Prodicus, one of the illustrious Sophists in Athens, is a rather enigmatic figure who came as a rhetorician to Athens around the beginning of the Peloponnesian War and stayed there for quite some time. We have only a small number of extant texts and fragments either by or concerning Prodicus, which is slight even in comparison with the relative paucity of textual evidence on Protagoras, Gorgias and Hippias. Except for one relatively long text which is preserved (or retold) by Xenophon in his *Memorabilia* (a didactic story about young Heracles’ conversation with Virtue and Vice),¹⁷ there are six brief and rather insignificant fragments in Diels and Kranz, two doubtful fragments and two false ones, along with twenty brief testimonies about Prodicus’ life and teaching. Apart from the biographical ones, nine fragments (A 11, A 13–A 20 DK) deal with the doctrine for which Prodicus was famous, namely, his teaching concerning the “rightness of names” (*peri onomatōn orthotētos*), or the correct usage of names.¹⁸ Most significant is that, of these nine testimonies or references to Prodicus, one is by Aristotle, and the other eight are from Plato in various dialogues of different periods.

Plato, who is usually rather critical of the Sophists, speaks highly of Prodicus, praising him as “the wisest man . . . and divine.”¹⁹ Why do we have so many references to Prodicus in Plato, and why are they mostly in passing? According to Socrates’ own testimony, he heard Prodicus speaking “thousands of times” and was obviously supportive of Prodicus’ doctrine on distinguishing names (*peri*

¹⁶ Aristotle. *Met* 1014 b 16–1015 a 19; 1017 a 7–1017 b 26.

¹⁷ Xenophon. *Mem.* II. 21–34 = Prodicus, B 2 DK.

¹⁸ Plato. *Crat.* 384 b. It is worth noting that this teaching of Prodicus is hardly mentioned in the preserved textual fragments, except for a very brief B 7 DK of Stobaeus.

¹⁹ [*P*]assophos...anēr...kai theios. Plato. *Prot.* 315 e.

onomatōn diairoyntos).²⁰ So the reason for Plato's recurrent references to Prodicus, without, however, any detailed discussion of Prodicus' doctrine, might be that Plato, through and together with Socrates, does in fact wholeheartedly embrace Prodicus' program, such that he implements it within his own dialogues and employs it in his written dialectical discussions.

Based on what we can say from the textual evidence found in Plato, Prodicus' teaching of the right distinctions between names²¹ presupposes, quite simply, that one has to try and trace all of the various possible meanings of a word and the ways in which it is "said" in language or *logos*, because "the name is different" (*to heteron einai onoma*), as Aristotle tells us in the *Topics*.²² Thus, for instance, "pleasure" for Prodicus may have three, and "learning" two, different meanings, and if one wants to come to an acceptable conclusion regarding them, then one needs to use them in the same way, and not differently.²³

The ability to know something dialectically, i.e., to produce an unwrapped *logos* that proceeds, step by step, from univocally and clearly defined premises in a certain correct order, presupposes making appropriate distinctions concerning the terms involved. The project of "distinguishing the names," or *legetai pollakhōs*, is closely connected with the "project" of the Greek *Aufklärung*, the "program" of the Sophistic Enlightenment which intends to provide an argument, a *logos*, for any given point so as to make it philosophically significant and politically acceptable, doing so by rendering a given, particular argument as the strongest and most persuasive. Prodicus' appeal to distinguishing as carefully as one possibly can between the meanings of the same word therefore finds its fullest support not only among the Sophists and the rhetoricians, but also among their opponents, which is exemplified in Socrates' oral dialectic, in Plato's written dialogic, and in Aristotle's formal logic. Prodicus' project thus becomes the commonly accepted and acceptable (and hence it is dissolved almost into anonymity) *conditio sine qua non* for any argumentative reasoning.

²⁰ Plato, *Charm.* 163 d.

²¹ As Plato says, Prodicus is better than the other Sophists in making proper distinctions between names. *Lach.* 197 b.

²² Aristotle, *Top.* 112 b 22 sqq.

²³ Plato, *Euthyd.* 277e; *Prot.* 337 c; *Meno* 75 e; Aristotle. op. cit. (*kathaper Prodikos diēireito tas hēdonas eis kharan kai terpsin kai eyphrosynēn*).

The study of the *logos* as language that pays attention to the proper distinctions between meanings, between multiple forms of one word, leads to a disproportionate development of morphology and semantics in comparison with syntax, which accounts for the “formal” aspect of language (this is also the case in contemporary philosophy of language, which follows Prodicus very closely, though not knowingly). The prevalence of semantics is rooted not only in that syntax is still relatively undeveloped in ancient Greek, but also in that Prodicus’ program is essentially a semantic one. The program of carefully distinguishing between various forms of a given word leads, furthermore, to attempts at investigating the word’s presumably historical, and speculatively reconstructed, “original” meaning(s), and thus to the development of etymology, which is another popular linguistic sport and entertainment during the age of Sophistry and the Enlightenment.

Laudable as it may be to make things fully explicit, self-evident, clear and distinct by discerning names and meanings, in the end, such an approach might not be viable. Both Socrates and Plato realize and recognize that even if it is necessary to try and enumerate and exhaustively distinguish *all* the meanings of a word, it is still very difficult, if not impossible, to do so, because the word can in principle always be used differently, either deliberately and on purpose, or in an unexpected and unpredicted new situation.

Indeed, nothing guarantees that we will be able to trace and identify all the ways in which a term is and can in principle be used, or that any given list, dictionary, or catalogue of meanings, is complete. In fact, as we now know from Gödel, if meanings refer to meaningful true propositions, they cannot be extinguished in their entirety. If, however, a term, a Prodician “name,” does not have to do with any semantic notion of truth, then at least a new meaning is in principle always possible by simply making a deliberate assignment, or by inventing an imaginary new situation (particularly in literature) in which the “name” can and will be used differently. All uses come from the *logos* as language, which, *qua* speech, is spontaneous and inventive, and it does not hesitate to (sometimes ironically and playfully) renew and renovate itself, to render new and previously unknown ways of thinking, and to get rid of the boredom of always repeating the same meanings. In this way, a “name” can always be creatively propagated and multiplied.

In an attempt to escape, overcome, and conquer the spontaneity and arbitrariness of language in its uncontrolled and uncontrollable

proliferation of different meanings for the same term, Plato and Aristotle make recourse to different strategies, which, however, appear to converge at a certain point. The *Willkür* of the language, and its seeming inability to arrive at a definite conclusion that might result from following the various bends and turns of an argumentative discussion in and by means of language, stun Socrates, and often make him recognize, toward the end of a discussion, that he did not happen to arrive at any meaningful conclusion (the only conclusion is the lack thereof), and that he in fact doubts (perhaps ironically) whether or not there can be such a conclusion.²⁴ Trying to cope with the multiplicity of meanings that crawl off in every direction, Plato then has to acknowledge and accept a whole multiplicity of ontological forms, *eidē*, each of which does not represent being, but *is* being, and is self-identical and thinkable as such, which prevents form from any unexpected change or sudden multiplication. The historical fate of such form, however, is far from being certain or becoming universally acceptable.

In contradistinction to Plato, the program of *legetai pollakhōs* as it is formulated by Aristotle, is predicated on two major terms. Firstly, *legetai*, “it is said,” brings us back to the impersonal and anonymous rendering of how something is. The passive voice of the verb *legetai* works as if to suspend the active *voice* of the *logos*, for there is neither a noun nor a subject in the programmatic statement. The “it is said” is speaking here independently of our intentions, and thus it invents newer and newer meanings, reproducing itself beyond our expectations and outside of the already established and published catalogue, which, inevitably, must then be revised and reprinted.

And secondly, the adverb *pollakhōs*, “in many ways,” points to a plurality of meanings that tend to pop up unexpectedly and almost independently of the intentions of the speaker, who thus remains unexpected to himself as a thinker. The *legetai pollakhōs*, “said in many ways,” therefore, may be understood as referring to a one *and* many,²⁵ to a collective unity that gathers many (meanings, appearances or instantiations, i.e., the ways in which things “participate” in a single indivisible form) into one (form), as well as to a collecting power of the *logos*, both of language and of the distinguishing order of an argument.

The unity in plurality of the *logos* as both language and argument, covers, in its various meanings, the relations between

²⁴ Plato, *Charm.* 175 c-e; *Euthyphro* 15 c-e; *Lysis* 223 e et al.

²⁵ Cp. Plato, *Parm.* 157 b sqq.

signing and the signed. Such unity can be taken either as the creative invention of a new meaning of the Prodician “name,” or as a discovery of “what is” as that which is independent of any logical activity of us as signifiers, thinkers and speakers. In the former (nominalist) case, one is concerned with the name; in the latter (realist) case, one’s concern is with the thing named.

The “rhetoricians” and the Sophists, including Prodicus himself, are concerned with the names and their being properly catalogued. Plato’s “thing,” which must be discovered through the *logos*-oriented dialectic, is being or form, *eidos*. Aristotle attempts to realize the “thing” differently, not as that which transcends the phenomenal world, but as that which is immanent to nature, and thus to make the logic-oriented and reasoning *logos* account for nature, *physis*. Aristotle’s “thing,” which is predicated (*legetai*) differently by many names (*pollakhōs*), is an object, a substance, *ousia*, which, as a substrate or *hypokeimenon*, underlies any change, and which is the subject of the predication or the description. In this case, the phrase “said in many ways” is itself said not about meanings, but about objects.

In the *Categories* (which is traditionally considered to be the opening treatise of Aristotle’s collected works), the very first paragraph considers synonyms and homonyms. The name (*onoma*) of a thing is distinguished from the speech or the definition of its essence, of what it is, which is the *logos* that corresponds to the name of a thing (*ho kata toynoma logos tēs ousias*).²⁶ The *things* that have the same name but a different *logos* are then said (*legetai*) to be homonymous (e.g., man and image as “living being”). Synonymous are those things or objects that have both the same name and the same *logos* (e.g., man and bull as “living being”). Aristotle thus connects the *onoma*, the name of a thing, with the *logos* of a thing—its definition, the speech about it, its relation to other things and the thing’s reason for being such as it is through an act of speaking or (logical) predication. Hence, those which are distinguished as synonymous are not *meanings* but *things*.

Prodicus’ program of “distinguishing the names” by making exact and well-defined divisions between different meanings appears to preserve form by making it precise in its appearance in *logos*, in language and discursive thinking. Establishing the discursive and ‘discursive’ *logos* of name distinctions as something fully unpacked and developed might indeed help to avoid the ambiguity of a plurality

²⁶ Aristotle, *Cat.* 1 a 1-12.

of meanings by referring to the thing itself, be it either intelligible or physical. However, such name distinction does lose the form by displacing it to the names of things rather than being concerned with the things themselves, for it thereby disintegrates the form into increasingly multipliable subdivisions, and in fact it discursively cancels the very possibility of non-discursive thinking with regard to the *eidos*, the formal (and normative) being and being of the formal.

Obviously, to try and distinguish all the possible ways in which a term is or might be used is to provide a classification. Early on, Aristotle gives us his classification of the sciences.²⁷ Later, all kinds of classifications are flourishing in the enlightened late ancient Second Sophistic, following Prodicus' precept. In particular, since rhetoric and logic are considered to be very similarly structured, insofar as both have to do with subdivisions of *logos*, we find many instances of rhetorical and literary classifications based on the specific distinctions within a genus. An example of such classification is a rhetorical treatise by Menander of Laodicea-on-Lycus, *Division of Epideictic Speeches*,²⁸ which attempts to provide a clear and final classification of the species, or forms, of speeches (each form being a species, *eidos*) by first of all dividing rhetoric itself into parts. According to Menander, rhetoric consists of three parts (*meresin*), comprising speeches that are pronounced in a court of law, those pronounced in assemblies or councils, and the so-called "epideictic" or "demonstrative," i.e., laudatory or invective, speeches. The speeches involving accusation do not have subdivisions, but those involving praise do. One kind among the encomiastic and laudatory speeches are those in praise of gods, which traditionally are called "hymns" (*hymnoys*); the other kind are laudatory speeches in praise of mortal objects, which comprise the praise of cities, countries, and of living creatures, the latter being subdivided into the praise of people and of non-rational animals, the latter of which is further distinguished into land-animals and water-animals, and the land-animals then being divided into the flying and the walking.²⁹ Hymns are also further divided into specific kinds, such as cletic (summoning gods), apopemptic (hymns on the occasion of a departure), "scientific" or "physical" (identifying a god with a physical object, e.g., the sun, and discussing its nature), mythical (containing myths and interpreting them allegorically), genealogical (following the

²⁷ Aristotle, *Met.* 1026 a 6-22.

²⁸ *Menander Rhetor.* [Diairesis]. Edited with Translation and Commentary by D. A. Russell and N. G. Wilson. Oxford, 1981.

²⁹ Menander, *Diairesis* 331, 1–332, 30.

theogonies of the poets), fictitious (personifying a god, e.g., as ‘Tomorrow’), precatory (consisting of bare prayers), and deprecatory (praying that something be averted).³⁰

Menander claims to have provided the ultimate and most exhaustive classification of hymns: his contention is that there can be no other forms or kinds, only combinations thereof.³¹ Menander, however, does not give a definitive principle that might account for his classification, such as the diaretic principle he supplies for mortal beings. His classification, obviously, reflects one of the common rhetorical usages of the time. However, even if a classifying principle were to be provided (such as, for example, Proclus provides in his classification of the Pythagorean quadrivium³²), can it be exhaustive? For it seems, rather, that all of the possible meanings, i.e., the ways in which a term or a form of speech can be meaningful, cannot be exhaustively distinguished due to the spontaneity of speech and to the many possible and deliberate inventions on the part of speakers. Besides, each kind of rhetorical speech, e.g., a hymn, is at the same time a pattern (*tropos*) or a form (*eidōs*).³³ The form is a form of speech, and as such, it can be understood as a *genre*. But can it be that all genres—all the various literary forms of *logos* as speech—may be exhausted in and by an ultimate classification, some single comprehensive enumeration? Can it be that no new literary forms are possible, and that those that are known so far do exhaust all the possible genres, as Menander claims with regard to the hymns, such that any future genre will always be but a variation on, or a combination of, those that were formerly already known? Is it possible that a new genre or a new literary form will arise, if not as one that is introduced deliberately, then at least as one that has appeared as an unexpected historical novelty? Are we always doomed to remain the “postmoderns” who have fully and forever extinguished all the possibilities of modernity and everything it has absorbed from antiquity, so that it only remains for us to mix already existing forms into cocktails of various proportions?

There is no place here to try and answer these most important questions. Rather, one may point out that not only the *gain* of a new form (particularly of a literary form) but also the *loss* of a previously

³⁰ Menander, *Diairesis* 333, 1-26.

³¹ “No hymns to gods can be composed outside of these patterns.” Menander, *Diairesis* 333, 26-27.

³² Proclus, *In Eucl.* 35-36.

³³ Menander, *Diairesis* 336, 27.

exiting form, is possible. One might say that a genre as a literary form does in fact historically develop: few of the poetic genres of classical Greece were still in use during Roman times. But the very understanding of the literary form as something that develops already implicitly denies and cancels it *qua* form, if, that is, the form is understood as stable and as that which does not change over time. A changing form, such as the *forma fluens* of the medieval mechanic, is simply a *contradictio in adiecto*, albeit, perhaps, a fruitful one, but a contradiction nonetheless. One might, however, resolve this difficulty in a relatively easy manner, namely, by assuming that a number of *different* forms follow each other in a certain succession, in which there may or may not be a proper form as *logos*, or an immanent logic.

However, if some previously known and widely practiced form of expression is lost, can it be restored or reproduced—or is there no return to it, no stepping back into the same river insofar as such a form has been practiced in a unique historical and cultural situation which can never be repeated? If no return is possible, then any reproduction, restoration or imitation, does in fact introduce a new literary form.

An example of the demise of a literary form is the dissolution of the philosophical dialogue. Literature, even if, nowadays, it is predominantly monological, is still hardly conceivable without dialogue; in philosophy, however, this does not seem to be the case. The very form or genre of the dialogue was first established by Zeno of Elea, according to Diogenes Laertius; according to Aristotle, it was established by Alexamenus.³⁴ Socrates discovers the dialogue as an *eidos* that is suitable for the oral-dialectical consideration of a subject (*any* subject) from various perspectives. His best disciple, Plato, uses the form of the dialogue extensively for philosophical purposes and brings it to perfection, doing so already as a *written* genre, which is unsurpassed not only in later ancient philosophy, but in ancient literature as well. As a literary form, the dialogue as “Socratic *logos*” (*Sōkratikos logos*) is employed by Aischines, Antisthenes, by the school of Megara (Euclides and Stilpon), by the Pythagoreans (Simon, Simmias and Cebes), and also by Aristotle and his school (Theophrastus, Dikaiarchus and Heracleidus Ponticus).³⁵ The form of the

³⁴ Diog. Laert. III, 24; III, 48. Cp. R. Hirzel, *Der Dialog. Ein literarhistorischer Versuch*. Teil I-II. Leipzig, 1895 (repr. Hildesheim, 1963). Tl. I, s. 100 sqq.

³⁵ Cp. Euclid. Frg. 18 (Döring. *Die Megariker. Kommentierte Sammlung der Testimonien*. Amsterdam, 1972); Stilpon. Frg. 188 (Döring); Diog. Laert. II, 121-5.

“Socratic *logos*” becomes widespread in late antiquity, which is represented in Lucian, Seneca, Cicero, and Tacitus, thus affecting the formation of the genre of the Stoic diatribe. The dialogue is still known in medieval philosophy, and to a less extent, in early modernity—in Galileo, Leibniz, Berkeley and Hume. In contemporary philosophy, however, the dialogue is barely used. To be sure, dialogue is still present in philosophical discussions, but only as the *oral* dialogue, although occasionally there are attempts to artificially distil such discussions into a written dialogue, to re-appropriate and revitalize it, e.g., by P. Feyerabend.³⁶

Much has been written about the utter inadequacy of the written substitution for dialogue, and about the ultimately inevitable misrepresentation of oral speech. I will abstain here from making any general claims about a possible relationship between the oral and the written with respect to form; I only want to outline such a relationship in one particular case, that of the philosophical dialogue.

For Plato, if being, as the form of that which exists, can be attained by people, then this could only happen as a rare, sudden and unexpected event; even if people have prepared for such an event with long years of training, still, it could only come as undeserved, and as a surprise. Dialogue, then, is precisely a compromise between the plurivocity of *logos*, which is always only partially accessible to the logical “walk” of reasoning (*dianoia*) through questions and answers, and the uniqueness of non-discursive being, *eidos*, which is only accessible in and to a momentary insight of thinking (*noys*). The inability to make the *logos* stand for the *eidos*, to adequately reproduce and imitate the latter, the incongruence and non-coincidence of the two, makes Plato choose a particular way of attaining being *qua* form of that which exists by an inevitable and dialectical inapprehension of being in the mutual *logos* of the dialogue.

If there is no *a priori* logical necessity for a term to have precisely this or that finite number of clearly distinguishable and defined meanings, such that the language may always in principle continue multiplying the meanings of a term, i.e., if a “name,” semantically, is potentially infinite,³⁷ then one might—and in fact

³⁶ P. K. Feyerabend. *Three Dialogues on Knowledge*. Oxford–Cambridge (Mass.), 1991.

³⁷ Cp. Nicholas of Cusa. *De docta ignorantia* I 25: “...the explaining names [i.e., particular specifications of one proper name, which is infinite, *nomen proprium est infinitum*] can be many, and never so many that there cannot be more (*explicantia possunt esse multa et nunquam tot et tanta, quin possent esse plura*).”

does—attempt to stop such spontaneous and uncontrolled semantic reproduction, to hold the existing meanings in a *status quo* and pinpoint them into a rigidly fixed and controllable form. Distilling meanings in this way requires making them ready at hand, *prêtes à porter*, i.e., rendering them easily available in a sure presence through a catalogue or a dictionary. Taming the meanings of a term requires writing them down. Rendering a term fully visible and audible in writing is intended to overcome the plurivocal otherness of Prodicus’ “name” (*onoma*), which is always “other” and “different” (*heteron*). The written fixation and correction of the oral is an attempt to save the form from polysemic indefiniteness, from the ambiguity of multiplicity, by providing a written measure to it, i.e., by pointing out the exact number of different meanings and cases of the name’s precise usage. However, this attempt at such painstaking clarification betrays the live spontaneity of the oral in and by that which is written.

Towards the end of the *Phaedrus* Plato’s Socrates pronounces his well-known philippics against writing.³⁸ Writing imitates and attempts to reproduce both being and the movement of the *logos* as a live dialectical conversation. The written dialogue is a reconstructive and imitative mediation between the oral dialogue and its logical codification in dialectic. Writing as a systematic philosophic enterprise is essentially an enlightened project of literacy and the memorable fixation of speech, which is generated and supported by the Sophists, who, in turn, are “wise” in writing and strong in composing beautiful persuasive speeches. For Plato, the dialogical speech closely follows, and thus imitates, being. Oral speech is a living and ensouled *logos* (*zōnta kai empsykhon*), and is itself further imitated by a written speech, which is a mute copy or *eidōlon*, an “idol.” But this double, written imitation of the live dialectical argument is already immovable. Nothing can be changed within the written once it has been written down and published. In its unchangeableness it is *literally* precise, though in a sense, such precision is less exact than that of ‘sloppy’ oral speech, for such speech can always explain itself further, even through incomplete and grammatically flawed rejoinders rather than perfect syllogisms. Moreover, that which is written cannot, ultimately, even be clarified; it cannot *defend* itself, and does not know when to speak and when to remain silent.³⁹ Being utterly immovable and inflexible (*ametakinēton*), the written is thus incapable of self-explanation and self-defense, which is one of the main reasons for

³⁸ Plato, *Phaedr.* 274 b sqq.

³⁹ Plato, *Phaedr.* 276 a.

Plato's preferring oral speech over and against writing in the *Seventh Letter*.⁴⁰

Writing, or *graphē*, drawing the portrait of a word, is thus astonishingly similar to painting or *zōgraphia*: both represent the living as living (*hōs zōnta*), but when you question them, they remain solemnly silent.⁴¹ Written speeches and dialogues do speak as if they were thinking (*hōs phronoyntas*), but when one inquires of them, and attempts to communicate dialogically, they always repeat the same thing. Being always the same, the written *logoi* lack the live *logos*, and retain only its petrified remains.

It is worth noting that there is a clear similarity between Plato's polemics against writing in the *Phaedrus*, and the speech of one of those who are wise in writing and strong in composing beautiful and persuasive speeches, namely, Gorgias' student, the Sophist Alcidas. His speech, *On those who write their speeches, or on Sophists*, is written against Isocrates and is most probably the source from which Plato borrows his arguments.⁴² Alcidas writes that it is not even proper to call written speeches "speeches" at all, since they are nothing but inert images and still appearances, which imitate live speeches in the same way that bronze statues imitate living bodies.⁴³ And just as bronze images are beautiful but utterly useless, so too are written speeches. The oral speech is pronounced with and from understanding, and is ensouled (*empsychos*), alive, and keeps pace with the circumstances in which it is set. This is why the oral speech is similar for Alcidas to living and ensouled bodies, whereas the written speech is only a lifeless imitation thereof, destitute of any actuality and frozen in a lack of any activity.⁴⁴

The original, plurivocal, live and ensouled *logos* can only be transmitted by those who were present to it while it was still alive

⁴⁰ Plato. Ep. VII, 342 e – 343 a.

⁴¹ Plato. *Phaedr.* 275 d-e. Cp. Th. A. Szlezák, *Reading Plato*. London–New York, 1999 (originally publ. as *Platon lesen*. Stuttgart–Bad Cannstatt, 1993). pp. 39 sqq.

⁴² Alcidas. *Peri tōn toys graptoys logoys graphontōn ē peri Sophistōn*, esp. 27–33. In: Antiphon. *Orationes et fragmenta, adiunctis Gorgiae Antisthenis Alcidasantis declamationibus*. Ed. F. Blass. Lipsiae, 1908², pp. 193–205; pp. 202–4. There might also be some similarity between Plato and Isocrates' *First Letter to Dionysius* concerning the defense of oral speech against writing; cp. L. Robin, commentary to the *Phaedrus*. Platon. *Oeuvres complètes*. T. IV, p. 3. Paris, 1966. p. clxvi.

⁴³ "[E]idōla kai skhēmata kai mimēmata logōn." Alcidas. *Peri soph.* 27.

⁴⁴ Alcidas. *Peri soph.* 28. Stressing the sheer incapacity of lifeless letters to hold the live spirit of oral prescriptions is also ascribed to the Pythagoreans and to Numa. See Plutarch, *Numa* 22, 1–8.

and not yet written down. This is why, as the *Anonymous Prolegomena to the Platonic Philosophy* suggest, instead of writing speeches, it is better to leave disciples, the “live and living speeches,” who can defend themselves in a live speech.⁴⁵ Pythagoras and Socrates acted precisely in this way, having left no written speeches behind but only like-minded disciples who were capable of communicating the oral *logos* and of continuing the ongoing philosophical discussion. The written dialogue, then, is not a memorable preservation of that which is said, but only a reminder of the former live dialogue and dialectical discussion, at best.⁴⁶

Aware of this difficulty, and indeed of the impossibility of dialogically fitting the plurivocal and ambiguous discursive *logos* into the non-discursive form of *eidos*, Plato nevertheless relentlessly explores the limits of the dialogical. Even if dialogue inevitably misplaces the pure thinkable form, and is unable to either freeze the form of that which is said into a memory, or to present such form in an argument, the dialogue for Plato is still a minimal compromise between being and its misrepresentation within discursive reasoning. Modern, and especially contemporary, philosophy, almost unanimously rejects the possibility of a form of being, as well as its non-discursive thinking and understanding. The demise of the dialogue as a form of philosophical expression, and of the motion of reasoning as it is shared with the other, is implicitly ingrained into the monologism of the subject, who is both the beginning and the end of modernity, of its self-(mis)understanding and self-reflection in philosophy.

Indeed, the subject is monological, for he or it does not need any other, even if he sincerely wants to possess such a need. The subject realizes, and to a large extent constructs, himself as both self-sufficient as well as, if not engendering, then at least determining the world in and by the act of thinking about that which is, which primarily involves thinking of himself as a universal subject. No wonder, then, that the dialogue, which presupposes a whole plurality of different, independent and yet mutually trustful voices, becomes obsolete for the subject, who is one consciousness, who is supposedly autonomous, and who is everyone’s, and hence no one’s, mind. The autonomous consciousness wants to be sure of what it thinks by constructing its thought into the knowledge of one universal subject, who knows precisely that which he himself engenders. This becomes possible once one takes univocality, which is considered indispensable

⁴⁵ Anon. *Proleg.* III, 13, 3 sqq.

⁴⁶ Plato. *Phaedr.* 275 d.

for knowledge, as “monovocality,” i.e., as one-voicedness and monologicality, which makes modern philosophy monological, mono-conscious and monosubjective throughout.

In a sense, monologism is already present in Plato’s dialogues. One (although not the only) reason for this is that his dialogues are written, and writing is monoconscious and already monological. The written speech cannot be rendered fully dialogical even if it is presented in the form of a dialogue, of a conversation that is put into a stichomythic form of alternating rejoinders between interlocutors, even when it is composed by such a brilliant dialogue writer as Plato. The written dialogue, which is a finalized imitation of plurivocal oral speech, is too inflexible a form for properly reproducing and reconstructing the dialectical movement of the live *logos*, which is always *legetai pollakhōs*. The written speech provides access to statements that may be correct, but which are nevertheless abstract and common, which are everybody’s and thus no one’s. Philosophical dialogue, as a written form of reasoning and argumentation, attempts, but does not succeed, at embracing and fitting the form of the oral *logos* into the written one. The written is already dead, whereas the oral is forever alive.

Thus, the attempts of that which is written to reproduce itself as being properly dialogical must fail, because the written can neither embrace, nor, due to its taut immovability and petrification, sufficiently imitate, the oral. In a sense, this is a double failure on the part of the written dialogical *logos* insofar as it inevitably misrepresents the oral discursive *logos*, which itself, as was argued, is unable, in its unavoidable ambiguity, and in all of its conversational protrusion, to stand for or accommodate the being of pure form in the *eidos*’ momentary gleam and non-discursivity. Hence, the written dialogue is the form of the double betrayal of the form of being.