Performative Plautus

Performative Plautus:

Sophistics, Metatheater and Translation

By

Rodrigo Tadeu Gonçalves

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To Gabriela, Olivia and Dora (in memoriam)

Le discours est un grand souverain qui, au moyen du plus petit et du plus inapparent des corps, parachève les actes les plus divins; car il a le pouvoir de mettre fin à la peur, écarter la peine, produire la joie, accroître la pitié. Je vais montrer qu'il en va bien ainsi.
(Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen*, 8., translated by Barbara Cassin)

If the language act turns out thus to be at the root of *tragedy*, it proves to be in just the same way – as Molière's *Don Juan* attests – at the root of *comedy*. The tragic and the comic both stem in fact from the relation between language and body: a relation consisting at once of incongruity and of inseparability. The speaking body is *scandalous* precisely to the extent that its *performance* is, necessarily, either *tragic* or *comic*.
(Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, 2002, pp. 66-7.)

Words are blunt instruments / Words are sawn-off shotguns.
(*Jigsaw Falling into Place*, Radiohead)

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FOREWORD

BARBARA CASSIN[1]

It is always a surprise to see that what one has written is useful. And when it is a happy surprise, one feels both validated and grateful. This is how I feel here. Rodrigo Tadeu Gonçalves knows how to read, be it Gorgias or Plautus, Florence Dupont or myself. Carrying sophistic Greek onto a terrain which of course it would never have suspected it would occupy – Roman comedy –, he uses it as I did myself, i.e., as a can opener, in order to open up a whole tradition that cannot be understood except as second. Twice second, in full awareness of what makes it become a procedure-process in literature as well as in philosophy or ontology: Roman comedy after Greek comedy, *comoedia palliata*, and the barbarian turn of the Greek language, *vortit barbare*, as said in the prologue of the *Asinaria*.

The whole phenomenon of what we call "translation" then becomes clarified, amplified, and apt for a rethink.

I would like to linger on two points which give structure to this constellation: the extension of the performance's area – as one says, the extension of the area of the fight – via the category of "semi-performative"; and the link between sophistics and "sophistication," which is evidently related to repetition and irony, and to the "meta-," in this case the "metatheatrical."

The relationship between the Austinian performative *stricto sensu* – "The court is now in session" – and the sophistic performative – *epideixis* as in Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* – is a real theoretical challenge. The short-circuit between one of the genuine inventions of contemporary linguistics or discourse-analysis, i.e. the Austinian performative, and a particular feature of ancient rhetoric, the omnipotence of *logos* as thought and practised by the Sophists, is not at all straightforward – *How to Really Do Things with Words* is the English title of the book I am currently trying to write. "Performance," in the more usual meaning of the word in English – that of a theatrical performance – is the link we are looking for. It allows

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[1] Translated by Rodrigo Tadeu Gonçalves.

us to suture sophistic logology (not say what is, but do what is said) with the success, or felicity, of the illocutionary act, which is neither true nor false, neither a value nor a fact ("play Old Harry with two fetishes which I admit to an inclination to play Old Harry with, viz (1) the true/false fetish (2) the value/fact fetish," was Austin's conclusion). In order to enlarge the notion of performative, Rodrigo Gonçalves invents the "semi-performative," which covers, in particular, *future statements*, all of those "I will do," "I am going to do" that mark the cumulative authority of the author and the actor. The actor acts as the author decides, but, in the play that he performs, he is authorized by no one except himself, as says Lacan about the psychoanalyst. And if the actor is a god, such as Mercury, his authority will be maximal ("*Deus sum, commutavero…*" *Amph*. 53).

The other *point de capiton* is the relationship sophistic–sophistication. Sophistics is a secondary discourse: Gorgias' *Treatise on Non-Being*, "On the Non-Being or on Nature," rereads and ironically re-poses Parmenides' *Poem*, "On Nature or on Being." It makes us hear the performative force which is operating within the poem but in an unsaid, hidden way, and shows how Being, for Parmenides, is already in fact an effect of saying. This secondarity is the reason why we easily take the sophistic text as a joke, a subordinated virtuosity which is totally useless, a baroque yet trivial contortion, destined only for the curiosity cabinet (sophistry? "a philosophy of verbal reasoning, lacking any solidity or seriousness," says Lalande). With the corpus of the *palliata*, this virtuosity becomes a genre and explicitly confronts its model. It invents face to face, displaces; its task is to put in words and in scenes those very displacements. The relationship between sophistics and the sophisticated becomes a cultural fact.

And so the *vortere barbare* is in turn a sophisticated invention, as whenever the "between," the distance, is aimed at. Translation does not make a switch from one language to another; it invents, it performs the comedy in Latin. The category of the *metatheatrical* allows Rodrigo Gonçalves to analyze the plays. It shapes the internal strategies of the theatre and of the play, which produce the difference within the repetition and place the outside, alterity and alteration, at the heart of the inside. And in particular it indexes the difference between an actor and his role – precisely what is at stake in the *Amphitryon* – which has already something of a *metapalliata*…

Translation is at the heart of this book. I do regret that the reader will actually need the English standard translation: it sometimes totally obscures the relationship between Greek and Latin, as well as the very pertinent analyses produced here. I will give a single example, taken from the scene between Sosia and Mercury. Sosia – the "real" Sosia is not Sosia

anymore because it is Mercury who is Sosia in his stead – despairs: "*Ubi ego formam perdidi ?... nam hic quidem omnem imaginem meam, quæ antehac fuerat, possidet*" (456–61), "Where did I lose my looks ? … Well, this man has my complete image, the one I had before." On my part, I think that, with *forma*, we are dealing with *eidos*, the being, the thing itself, the "real," and not with the *looks*, the appearance, that which we look like. On the other hand, with *imago* we are certainly dealing this time with *eidôlon*, the "image," in the sense of appearance, resemblance. That is not easy to translate: "Where have I lost my essence, my idea," Sosia would cry, "since that man has my entire appearance [*my looks*, if you like], since he's the image and the phantom of myself." The opposition is evidently Platonic, and in its own way *Amphitryon* replays Euripides' *Helen*, the most anti-Platonic play ever written: in *Helen*, the image and the word are more real than reality, and solely the image persuades for good. We know that in Euripides, it is only the name of Helen, the *flatus vocis*, that went to Troy; Helen, the thing Helen, her self, the "real" Helen, was transported by Hera to Egypt, to the palace of the old Proteus, in order to spare her the shame of cuckolding her husband. It is therefore only the name, the *imago* that went to the walls of Troy, and for which Greeks and Trojans killed each other. When Menelaus lands in Egypt on the way home, precisely where Helen, his Helen, the real one, is about to make a sacrifice, he refuses to believe that it is Helen he is actually seeing. She recognizes him, she talks to him, she tells him who she is, but he prefers the *eidôlon*, the *imago* that he brought with him and kept safe in a cave, but which is, however, nothing but an *agalma* made of clouds. Menelaus chooses the name of Helen, "Helen" (to use our quotation marks), instead of Helen herself, the *eidôlon* instead of the *eidos*, the *imago* instead of the *forma*. He is actually troubled when Helen tells him that she is called "Helen," but after all "the name can be in many places, but not the body" (Euripides, *Helen*, 588). Amphitryon is not dissimilar to Menelaus: "*tun id dicere audes quod nemo umquam antehac vidit nec potest fieri, tempore uno idem duobus locis ut simul sit?*" (*Amphitryon*, 566–68), "Do you dare to tell me a thing which no one's ever seen before and which is impossible, namely that one and the same man can be in two places simultaneously at the same time?" (this time, the translation, a transfer of Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction, works perfectly). The sophistic equation, that of Euripides and that of Plautus, is that "Sosia" is not Sosia, since the equation of identity is undone as soon as we name, when we speak, when we play with the difference between word and thing. Both plays, both tragicomic – one says that very often about Euripides' play, and Plautus himself says it about his own – deal with the virtue of an

adulterous woman who is more chaste than it might seem. And where a Jupiter decrees a sacrifice in honor of himself, a Menelaus organises his own funeral. In short, this is an ontological and mythological performance, which re-deals with the most stable and sacred things; and, as perfectly analysed by Rodrigo Gonçalves, it is at the same time a kind of subjective trouble, a crisis of the subject, signed Plautus.

There is a fragment of Gorgias, often quoted by Hannah Arendt, which – so said Plutarch – applies to theatre (82 B 23 DK): "The one who deceives is more just than the one who doesn't, and the one who's deceived is more wise than the one who isn't." Nothing to do here with an ethically correct post-Aristotelian connection between ethics and theatre via *catharsis*. It is all about "deception," *apatê*, the feeling which links the one who speaks with the one who listens, and which is proper to what Nietzsche calls "the space of appearances." There is no longer any back-world of ideas, only one world with energy propagating in it. Just as in "sophisticated" comedy, just as in translation-invention. The work of Rodrigo Gonçalves, which immerses logological concepts in new contexts, allows us to understand the link between performance in theatre and performance in translation. It has to be continued; imperatively so.

PREFACE

FLORENCE DUPONT[1]

Why add a preface to this clear and strong book that offers readers everything they need in order to be convinced? Let us start with the Latin. The term *praefatio* designates the introductory phase of a sacrifice: a libation of incense and wine over a portable hearth-stone, during which the sacrificer invokes the divinities to whom the sacrifice is offered. Since this raises ambiguities about the nature of those being addressed, the term has come to focus on the act of speech itself: the "fore-word."

This *praefatio* will thus speak to those to whom the book itself is addressed, and address them by taking as point of departure that which the reader encounters at the outset: the title. For many readers, this title no doubt will be an enigma. It is an enumeration which proposes topics without announcing the path via which the four key words could be linked. Many paths are possible, according to the reader and his expectations. At first glance, one can interpret this title as the announcement of unexpected relations among sophistics, metatheater, and translation practice in order to find a performative Plautus, i.e., one who escapes traditional literary history and analysis. Who is this book for? Naturally, for those interested in Roman Comedy, but to approach this book via Plautus means being prepared to follow a difficult route.

In fact it is not actually necessary to be a classicist or a specialist in ancient theater – indeed that could even be an obstacle – in order to uncover what this essay offers. It is much easier to use one of the other four entrances – performativity, metatheater, sophistics, or translation – in order to move around the poles of the text and engage in a decentered reading. Plautus withdraws from his position as the main subject of the book and becomes the jumping-off point for contemporary questions concerning representation, theatricality, translation, and ontology. Thus, this preface proposes to briefly suggest a possible route.

No matter what the chosen route, this book compels readers to discard their preconceptions about Plautus and Roman Comedy, and to accept the

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[1] Translated by Rodrigo Tadeu Gonçalves.

association of normally disjoint fields. The most unexpected link is doubtless between Plautus and sophistics. In the contemporary imagination, Plautus is an author of rude farces for an audience of uneducated Italian peasants, while sophistics is an extreme form of refined language specific to urban Greek culture. Where can the meeting happen?

Let us first dispense with one ambiguity. This is not a matter of finding "the philosophy" of Plautus, a worldview underlying his comedies which would contribute to their meaning; nor is it a matter of asking whether Plautus refers to the major figures of Greek philosophy through citations or allusions; nor even of whether Plautus personally adopted a sophistic conception of language.

Sophistics here serves to designate a transversal practice which bears witness to a non-Aristotelian usage of language in antiquity; a usage that denied the opposition between words and things, the distinction between being and non-being. That is precisely what the prologue to the *Captivi* says. The prologue speaks as an actor in the play and addresses the audience after having summarized the plot of the comedy about to be played:

> *haec res agetur nobis, vobis fabula.* (v. 52)

> Reality for us will be what we act, and for you what we will act will be a story, words, a theater play. (trans. Dupont, Gonçalves)

This line has the form of a *sententia*, characterized by chiastic symmetry, the recovery in ellipsis, a form that describes a comedy with two faces. The side which faces the spectator is a verbal fiction; the other side, the actor's, is an acted reality. The *sententia* opposes *res* – reality, the action of the comedy, the deeds – to *fabula*, the words, the fiction, according to the *re* vs. *verbo* paradigm: "in reality vs. in appearance." But here *res* and *fabula* are the same reality, depending on whether they are being apprehended by the public or the actors. On the other hand, the *spectatores* are nothing but attentive ears; they are external to the action, the *res*. If we give the words *agetur* and *fabula* their technical value, the *sententia* takes on yet another meaning: *agere* means the actor's play, *fabula*, a theatrical play. The line recalls each one's place in the comic performance: the actors play, the audience watches a play.

The double status of comedy, as being and not-being, thus reveals itself only in performance. Without the public of the *ludi scaenici* for whom the actors play, or without the actors who create the ritual event, *res* and *fabula* disappear simultaneously. What remains is nothing but a story that can be true or false, the fodder of textual commentaries.

Thus, Rodrigo Gonçalves can write "Plautus makes *theater about nothing*." In fact, Plautus doesn't set out from an extra-theatrical reality – or a prior narrative – that he will represent; the only reality of a comedy is that of the play (*le jeu*), and for the comic action the question of truth or falseness is senseless. The action belongs to reality because it is playable by the actors, it belongs to the reality which is the world of comedy; but this world is a verbal creation, a *fabula*, which is received and accepted as such by the audience in the context of the *ludi scaenici*, because it is what a *fabula* is supposed to be: a theater play, in accordance with the comic code.

The link between Plautus and sophistics therefore exists at a level which is not theoretical but practical, and is relevant only if his comedies are analyzed as ludic performances – i.e., realized for the Roman *ludi scaenici*, if we are to talk of a Performative Plautus.[2] Roman Comedy is a world whose comic code is the only reference needed to "create world" (*faire monde*).

That is why "to be or not to be" is a false question, as the prologue to the *Casina* says. He announces that the subject of the play will be a marriage of slaves, and then pretends to give the floor to the audience:

> There are people here who I believe are now saying to each other: "Please, what's that? A slave wedding? Are slaves going to marry or ask for a wife? They've brought us something new, something that doesn't happen anywhere in the world." (67–70, trans. De Melo)

To which it answers:

> But I insist that it does happen in Greece and Carthage, and here in our land in the land of Apulia. There, an even greater effort is made for slave weddings than for those of free men. If anyone wishes to, let him bet a pitcher of honey-wine against me that this isn't the case, provided that the referee is a Carthaginian or a Greek, or an Apulian for all I care. Well then? No takers? I see, nobody's thirsty. (71–78, trans. De Melo)

In Rome no less than in Greece, slaves do not get married, because legally they cannot have descendants; everyone in the audience knows that. There is no slave marriage in any other comedy. Thus, Plautus introduces an exorbitant variation, though always possible in the sense that he indicates

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[2] We could go further on that road, beyond this book, until we found a recent philosophical movement, usually called "anthropological ontology," which, among other things, assigns the same ontological status of material reality to the imaginary of a culture.

it as such. True in the world of this comedy, false elsewhere, this fiction passes from one world to another through a play with jokes. The one who judges true or false here will be either a patent liar, because he is Greek or Carthaginian, or he will be Calabrian, like the prologue, who is from Calabria – the script locates the events of the play in Calabria – and he will give the victory to his compatriot. In the end, the question of truth disappears because the reason for the debate becomes: to be thirsty, or not.

We can also read this book by focusing on the question of translation. This entrance will take us to the same result, but via a different route: the comedies of Plautus in performance are double-faced. The comedy written in Latin is the reverse of the comedy written in Greek. Both are present in the performance at the same time. Sometimes characters speak (in Latin) as if they were Greeks, sometimes they speak as Romans. An example.

In *Asinaria*, the prologue, speaking about the play, says (Maccus is one of Plautus' names):

> *Demophilus scripsit, Maccus vortit barbare.*

> Demophilus is the author (of this play), Maccus translated it into the barbarian language. (trans. Dupont, Gonçalves)

The barbarian "language," for a Greek, is Latin, of course, and the formulation makes the prologue a Greek character, who addresses, in Latin, a Greek audience. That is a metatheatrical play about translation.

In *Casina*, on the other hand, the prologue addresses a Roman audience. However, it is important to notice that *haec comoedia*, "this comedy we are playing," designates both the Greek play and its Latin translation:

> *Clerumenoe uocatur haec comoedia*
> *Graece, latine Sortientes.*

> This comedy is called *Kleroumenoi* in Greek, in Latin "Men Casting Lots." (31–2, trans. De Melo)

Both with Plautus and with Roman Comedy we find another conception of translation, which does not aim at transmitting a meaning but rather to realize a presence. The Latin *translatio* makes it possible that a Greek tragedy or a comedy could be present in the Roman *ludi scaenici*, in the absence of the Greek text made for the Greek musical contests. Translation is travesty.

These different readings are gathered together in the analysis of the *Amphitryon* which occupies the second half of Rodrigo Gonçalves's book.

The first half can be considered as propaedeutic for this play, which explores sophistics, metatheater, and translation, to the highest degree. I leave to the reader the pleasure of discovering the details of this third chapter, called *Omnibus isdem vorsibus*, after the formula used by Mercury in the prologue: the very same lines can be those of a tragedy or those of a comedy. Just a few words on that formula.

The author shows that this "tragicomedy" is a tragedy translated into comedy according to the principle of translation from Greek into Latin, the translation of presence and not of meaning: the divine characters leave the world of tragedy by changing their costumes, making a travesty (*travestissant*, lit. to cross-dress) of the comic characters, while remaining as tragic actors who will play the comedy better than the comic actors whose place they will take. Mercury is a better *seruus callidus* than Sosia and Jupiter is a better *senex* who lies to his wife than Amphitryon. This is what they prove in the scenes where they confront themselves: divine actors (tragic) against human actors (comic).

This analysis has two consequences for the interpretation of the *Amphitryon*. First of all, *Amphitryon* is entirely a comedy, and does not represent the only example of a lost genre, the tragi-comedy. The prologue of the *Amphitryon* does not define a new genre, the "tragi-comedy," for which it would propose new rules, but plays with passing from one genre to another as a theatrical practice, in order to create the ritual conditions of the play, departing from the expectations of the audience. Pronounced by Mercury dressed as a *seruus callidus*, wearing the same costume as Sosia and observing the same code, the prologue is also the god Mercury, messenger, and, as such, a tragic character, since there are no messengers in comedy, but only scenes of *seruus currens*. Conversely, in the scene right after the prologue, Sosia makes an entrance as a tragic messenger, playing the role of the *seruus currens*, saying that he is a false messenger because he has not actually seen what he is about to narrate. He was not in the battle for he is a comic slave but, as a *seruus callidus*, he shows that he is capable of lying and inventing the speech of a tragic messenger.

Second consequence. It is not fitting to project upon the famous encounter between Sosia and Mercury, where the god forces the slave to give up his place as the slave of Amphitryon, a metaphysical meditation about identity. The audience sees the two actors playing two identical characters. They have the same *persona*, the same role (same mask, same costume, same play and same text), but, in order to prevent the audience being afflicted by the vertigo of indistinction, Mercury bears a golden feather on his hat. At no moment does Sosia lose his identity; what he loses, rather, is his role in the play. The *persona*, in fact, is not the *imago*,

that funeral mask that bears the individual traces of an individual. A theatrical character does not have a face; that is why he can meet his double. The company manager simply has to distribute the role of *seruus callidus* twice, and make them confront each other. This is a metatheatrical game that takes place many times in Plautus. Just as in *Pseudolus*, where Pseudolus, the main *seruus callidus*, recruits Simia, the well-named, to act on his behalf. The latter has the same *persona* and he is so good in the role that Pseudolus fears that he will be replaced.

    The scene between Sosia and Mercury exploits the schema, recurrent in Roman Comedy, of the encounter: the *salutatio*. Two characters meet onstage and, before starting their dialogue, they recognize each other and greet each other using their names. This name is their identity – *imago* – in the comedy, independently of their *persona*. As they do not have an *imago*, a face, but the mask of their role, their identity is purely verbal, it is invisible and is reduced to their name. Plautus then exploits the comic code in such a way that we do not have to give this scene an extra-theatrical meaning, since everyone, outside the world of theater, has a face and individual traits. Sosia is not anyone's Sosia: he loses his name, i.e., his role in the play, and nothing more. This scene is not a metaphysical experience but a sophistic exploitation of translation that transforms a tragic and divine messenger into a comic and human slave.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In this book I put to use a theoretical and philosophical framework for the analysis of Plautus under a performative and philosophical view of language and theatrical performance. This is done through a close reading of Plautus' works, especially *Amphitruo*. The direct influence on my analysis of the works of Barbara Cassin, Florence Dupont, Pierre Letessier and Timothy Moore is evident, and I gratefully acknowledge this here. The main aim here is to try to understand Plautus' texts as more than simple literary remains of "archaic" Latin literature, but as witnesses of a process of using language to perform an entire world through the recognition of the power of language itself as a creative and constitutive agent of theatrical codification and variation of its own rules and conventions. The analyses, again, are carried out through the lenses of Cassin's proposal of an *effet monde* as a result of a performative sophistic view on language (especially regarding the sophists, as in her 1995 work *L'effet sophistique*), as well as Florence Dupont's unique stance on Roman Comedy as an example of non-Aristotelian theater, based on metatheater and convention-variation as special characteristics of a *ludic theater* which plays around with its own rules after putting them in the foreground. Barbara Cassin and Florence Dupont, specialists in the field, were invited to contribute with a foreword and a preface. I thank them for their contributions, and for the profound influence they have had on my research. I also extend grateful thanks to the staff at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, especially Sam Baker, for their kind support during the preparation of this volume. I would also like to thank Ben Young for proofreading; the prose is much better styled as a result.

The work on this book was interrupted by my return to Brazil and the resumption of my academic duties as a professor at the Federal University of Paraná. For some years the manuscript sat silent without accretions or improvements, until a grant from CNPq allowed me to come back to it. Lack of time, and personal difficulties including the loss of my youngest daughter who suffered from a serious disease, have prevented me from enhancing the discussion through reference to important recent scholarship, such as W. H. Shearin's *The Language of Atoms* (2015), which deals with Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and speech act theory in a similar endeavor to put the ancient and the modern in conversation. Other

important recent publications have also been neglected as a result of the gap between the completion of the 2012 version of this work and its final version. I am sorry for that, but also hopeful that this short piece of scholarship may encourage other researchers to continue this line of research.

INTRODUCTION

How do sophistics and performativity relate to Roman theater, to the plays of Plautus and Terence? Let us start from one possible beginning: the important question posed by Gorgias' treatise *On the Non-being or on Nature*.[1] The three theses of the treatise are: (i) nothing is; (ii) even if something is, it cannot be apprehended by men; and (iii) even if it can be apprehended, it cannot be communicated and explained to others. Cassin's *L'effet sophistique*, in its first part (23–150), deals mostly with Gorgias' *Treatise* and his *Encomium of Helen*. The argumentation demonstrates how Gorgias, in the *Treatise*, with his apparent parody of the discourse of the philosophers of nature (most of the Presocratics, but especially Parmenides), ends up subverting their discourse in order to create a sophistic ontology: *only the non-being* is. Previous ontologies by natural philosophers on the eve of philosophy progressed by reference to the number of things of which the universe is made, be it water, fire, air, atoms, being itself or any possible mixture of these entities, but Gorgias establishes a powerful sophistic subversion of one particular such philosophical doctrine: that of Parmenides' poem *On Nature*.[2] In Parmenides' fragment II, the goddess declares the two possible ways of knowing:

> Εἰ δ' ἄγ' ἐγὼν ἐρέω, κόμισαι δὲ σὺ μῦθον ἀκούσας,
> αἵπερ ὁδοὶ μοῦναι διζήσιός εἰσι νοῆσαι·
> ἡ μὲν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι,
> Πειθοῦς ἐστι κέλευθος – Ἀληθείῃ γὰρ ὀπηδεῖ – ,
>
> [5] ἡ δ' ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς χρεών ἐστι μὴ εἶναι,
> τὴν δή τοι φράζω παναπευθέα ἔμμεν ἀταρπόν·
> οὔτε γὰρ ἂν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἐὸν – οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν –
> οὔτε φράσαις.
>
> Come now, I will tell thee – and do thou hearken to my
> saying and carry it away – the only two ways of search that
> can be thought of. The first, namely, that It is, and that it is
> impossible for anything not to be, is the way of conviction,
>
> [5] for truth is its companion. The other, namely, that it is not,
> and that something must needs not be, – that, I tell thee, is a

wholly untrustworthy path. For you cannot know what is
not – that is impossible – nor utter it.[3]

Therein lies the *krisis* and *l'interdit* of Parmenides: only the way of being
is, and it is impossible for something *not to be*, but, at the same time, the
second way, amenable to thinking and saying, is the way to be avoided,
the way of non-being. In order to interdict/*interdire* it, it must be said/*dit*.
Cassin has a better way of putting things:

> Tout le travail de Gorgias consiste à rendre manifeste que le poème
> ontologique est déjà en soi un discours sophistique, et même, la
> *philosophia perennis* tout entière est là pour en témoigner, le plus efficace
> de tous les discours sophistiques possibles. En d'autres termes, la
> sophistique est une autre sorte de poésie, poésie de grammairien peut-être,
> qui s'efforce de dévoiler les mécanismes de la grâce efficace du langage.
> (Cassin, *L'effet sophistique*, 28)

The effect performed by Cassin's analysis is a Gorgian interpretation
which sustains the view that the poem is a sophistic artifact. She does it by
reading both treatises closely together, by showing that both can deduce
the existence of the non-being somehow out of its effability: the non-being
is somehow secreted as a subject of the verb "to be." The possibility of
pronouncing the non-being and the being plays different roles in the two
texts, of course, but this very effability is at the heart of the question: if in
Parmenides the non-being can be, although it must be avoided, in Gorgias,
the non-being, by being, makes being impossible. Both arguments lead to
one of Cassin's most important corollaries: being is an effect of saying. By
this, one can conclude that Parmenides' poem is also a sophistic discourse
in a certain sense:

> Les deux affirmations majeures du poème: l'être est, le non-être n'est pas,
> et l'identité ou la coappartenance de l'être et du penser (Si Parménide),
> suffisent à produire la thèse caractéristique de la sophistique:
> l'impossibilité de distinguer, du point de vue de l'être, le vrai du faux
> (alors Gorgias). Pas de place non plus pour l'erreur ou le mensonge: c'est
> l'ontologie de Parménide et elle seule, prise au mot et poussée à bout, qui
> garantit l'infaillibilité et l'efficace du discours, par la même sophistique. À
> nouveau, l'être est un effet de dire, seulement il ne s'agit plus là d'une
> critique de l'ontologie – votre prétendu être, ce n'est jamais qu'un effet de
> la manière dont vous parlez – mais d'une revendication de la logologie:
> "les démonstrations disent tout sans exception" (De M., X., G., 980 a9s.) –
> puisque rien n'est à la manière dont (se) le fait croire l'ontologie, il n'y a
> pas d'autre consistance que celle d'être soutenu. (*L'effet sophistique*, 47–
> 48)

This approximation between Gorgias and Parmenides sheds light on the foundation of Cassin's concept of *logology*:[4] it is a kind of performativity, although different from the limited performativity of Austin's *How to do Things with Words*, which is at first a simple opposition between constative utterances, capable of stating things, the eternal true/false of all Philosophy of Language and Semantics since Antiquity, and performative ones, capable of doing things, like marrying a couple, christening a ship or sentencing an indicted wrongdoer. More than that, however, what is at stake here is language constitutivity as a power of *logos*, of performativity as a way of creating being. Again Cassin: "dire, c'est dire quelque chose; dire quelque chose, c'est dire l'être; dire, c'est donc dire la vérité" (*L'effet sophistique*, 48).

We are, thus, in the domain of the powerful *logos* of the sophists. The other text by Gorgias, the *Encomium of Helen*, will be analyzed in Chapter One, but some things can be anticipated: it displays the self-awareness of the sophist regarding the power of speech, and this power is built, is constituted, and is performed by clear performative utterances, such as "ἐγὼ δὲ βούλομαι λογισμόν τινα τῶι λόγωι δοὺς τὴν μὲν κακῶς ἀκούουσαν παῦσαι τῆς αἰτίας, τοὺς δὲ μεμφομένους ψευδομένους ἐπιδείξας καὶ δείξας τἀληθὲς [ἢ] παῦσαι τῆς ἀμαθίας" (Gorg. *Enc.* 2) [I wish, by adding some reasoning to my speech, to free the slandered woman from the accusation and to demonstrate that those who blame her are lying, and both to show what is true and to put a stop to their ignorance].[5] This means that he *wishes* to and *will* show how she is innocent of all the possible sources of the guilt attributed to her, i.e., fate, gods, human seduction/violence or the power of *logos*. This last one is the most interesting, since it gives rise to Gorgias' astonishing definition of *logos*, followed by another self-aware performative promise:

λόγος δυνάστης μέγας ἐστίν, ὃς σμικροτάτωι σώματι καὶ ἀφανεστάτωι θειότατα ἔργα ἀποτελεῖ· δύναται γὰρ καὶ φόβον παῦσαι καὶ λύπην ἀφελεῖν καὶ χαρὰν ἐνεργάσασθαι καὶ ἔλεον ἐπαυξῆσαι. ταῦτα δὲ ὡς οὕτως ἔχει δείξω (*Enc.* 8)

Speech is a powerful ruler. Its substance is minute and invisible, but its achievements are superhuman; for it is able to stop fear and remove sorrow and to create joy and to augment pity. I shall prove that this is so.

Le discours est un grand souverain qui, au moyen du plus petit et du plus inapparent des corps, parachève les actes les plus divins; car il a le pouvoir de mettre fin à la peur, écarter la peine, produire la joie, accroître la pitié. Je vais montrer qu'il en va bien ainsi.[6]

It is, then, time to sum things up and introduce the main point of the book: this nothingness of sophistics is fundamental to Plautus' theater. Gorgias is capable of overturning all previous ontologies and the *philosophia perennis*, and even capable of justifying a philosophy about nothing, about the *non-being*. Barbara Cassin's development of what I dare to call a *theory of language* inspired by the sophistic effect gave rise to a desire to show how this other possible kind of language (which Aristotle in *Metaphysics Gamma* dubs the speech of plants, of those who speak for the pleasure of speaking, *logou kharin*[7]) is also, perhaps, the language of other sophists, or would-be sophists, the playwrights of Roman *Palliata*, especially Plautus. Following mostly in Barbara Cassin and Florence Dupont's footsteps, I will show that Plautus is a special, non-Aristotelian author in two different ways: (i) as a subscriber to the *legein logou kharin*, or as an irreducible adversary of Aristotle's Principle of Non-Contradiction (referring to Cassin's notions of "performative," "logology"), and (ii) as a dissident of the precepts of Aristotle's *Poetics* (referring to Dupont's notions of "performance," "ludism").

Thus, Plautus makes *theater about nothing*, using the non-Aristotelian speech of plants, of sophists, daring to defy the most basic principle of philosophy and so to propose a world in which something may be and not be in the same way at the same time. This book is an attempt to regard his plays from a slightly different perspective. In Chapter One, "What it Means to be non-Aristotelian, or the Sophist-Playwright," I will try to clarify the two possible ways of being non-Aristotelian by a closer reading of Barbara Cassin's critique of Aristotle's *Metaphysics Gamma* and Florence Dupont's *Aristote ou le vampire du théâtre occidental*. Chapter Two, "Performative Translation," explores translation as a way of doing (sophistic and literary) things with words, through a brief analysis of Plautus' way of translating, as well as of some of his contemporaries, from Livius Andronicus to Terence. Chapter Three, "Omnibus isdem vorsibus," explores the *Amphitruo* as a model of sophistic play through a more detailed analysis of metatheater and the sophistication of the discussion of genre.

Notes

[1] Transmitted two times, by Pseudo-Aristotle, *De Melisso, Xenophane Gorgia* (Ps.-Arist. 979 a12–980 b22), and later by Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Math.* VII 65–87. I will base my analyses and translations on Barbara Cassin's translations and commentaries as found in *L'effet sophistique* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1995). See also the edition of and commentary on the anonymous treatise in Cassin, *Si Parmenide* (Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1980).

² Cassin also published her own edition and translation of this poem, with commentary: *Sur la nature ou sur l'étant: La langue de l'être* (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

³ Translation by John Burnet (1892). Cassin's translation of the fragment goes as follows:

> La première que est et que [il] n'est pas [possible de] n'être pas,
> c'est chemin de persuasion, car il suit la vérité.
> La seconde que n'est pas et qu'est besoin de n'être pas,
> celle-là, je te dis que c'est un sentier tout trompeur
> car tu ne saurais connaître ce qui justement n'est pas (car on ne peut le
> [mener à bien]
> ni le dire.
> (Cassin, *L'effet sophistique*, 29)

⁴ The term itself she borrows from Novalis (Cassin, *L'effet sophistique*, 114–15).

⁵ All Gorgias translations are those of D. M. MacDowell (1982). Cassin translates as follows: "Moi je veux, donnant logique au discours, faire cesser l'accusation contre celle dont on entend tant de mal, démontrer que les blâmeurs se trompent, montrer la vérité et mettre fin à l'ignorance" (Cassin, *L'effet sophistique*, 142).

⁶ *Enc.* 8. I continue citing both English and French translations because Cassin's rendering of Gorgias is unavoidable, and MacDowell's is retained just to avoid retranslating Gorgias through Cassin.

⁷ See Barbara Cassin and Michel Narcy, *La Décision du sens* (J. Vrin, 2000), which will be discussed below in Chapter One.

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE NON-ARISTOTELIAN, OR THE SOPHIST-PLAYWRIGHT

This chapter presents two different critiques of Aristotle's works in order to present two possible ways of being non-Aristotelian. The works of Barbara Cassin and Florence Dupont lead us to two different conceptions of non-Aristotelianism: the first, philosophical, is linked to the possibility of sustaining a contradictory discourse, and is linked to the tradition of the sophists, which has been relegated to a secondary position in the history of philosophy. In a certain sense, Cassin shows us that the exclusion of the sophists from humanity is itself the result of a kind of sophistic trick perpetrated by Aristotle's *Metaphysics Gamma*. Dupont, on the other hand, tries to save theater from Aristotle's literarization and normativity, proposing that some theatrical traditions (among these, Roman *Palliata*, but even Classical Greek Tragedy) do not work according to Aristotle's laws, and worse, when they are regarded through the *Poetics* looking-glass, they lose all of their performative interests (in both senses) and become mere literature. In a certain sense, this is the only "theoretical" chapter of this book, and the other chapters will deal with applications of the ideas presented here.

1.1. Non-Aristotelianism according to Barbara Cassin

I will try to show here that translation, metatheater and genre self-awareness are special kinds of sophistication that Plautus achieves by subscribing to a very special kind of linguistic register. We could call this register, following Cassin's reading of Aristotle's *Metaphysics Gamma*,[1] the register of speaking for the pleasure of speaking, *legein kharin logou*, or *the speech of plants*. What I mean here is that in many aspects, Plautus can be compared to the sophists in the way he challenges the principle of non-contradiction, and that this seems to be deliberate. Plautus' characters speak for the pleasure of speaking, as they do not seem to make the *décision du sens* implied by Aristotle's demonstration of the principle by

transcendental refutation (as we will see below). This section will explore Cassin's reading of Aristotle and prepare the way for the analyses to be developed in the next chapters.

Metaphysics Gamma is a book about the theory of "being as being" (*Metaph.* 1003a 1).[2] In her introductory essay, Cassin delves into the most important question posed by this book in order to broach the effective question of being, which concerns Aristotle's proposition of the principle of non-contradiction. Some of the formulations can be classified according to the domains involved. One of them, the "ontological" formulation, states that "it is impossible that the same belongs and does not belong to the same simultaneously under the same relation" (1005b 19–20). The second one, "logical," states that "the most certain of all principles is that contradictory statements [*antikeimenai*] are not true at the same time" (1011b 13–14). And finally, the "psychological" formulation is that "no one can believe that the same can be and not be at the same time" (1005b 23–24).

Thus, all of Cassin's text works as a criticism of the fact that, in order to avoid begging the question (*petitio principii*), Aristotle builds his treatise in such a way as to avoid having to demonstrate his principle, by formulating it as the "ultimate axiom" of all axioms (an "intangible dogma": Lukasiewicz, cited in *La décision du sens*, 11), and therefore necessarily indemonstrable; indeed, should it need to be derived from other premises there would be no end to the chain of further demonstrations, leading to the feared *regressio ad infinitum*.

The power of Aristotle's arguments stems from his ability to assign to his adversary the burden of refutation, since the principle could only be demonstrated through showing the impossibility of its refutation. In a certain sense, Aristotle creates a philosophical trap from which one cannot escape, at least until Cassin's reading:

> Sans doute en effet n'y a-t-il depuis Aristote pas d'autre parti à prendre que le parti aristotélicien: avec le livre *Gamma* de la *Métaphysique*, il se pourrait en effet qu'Aristote ait investi tout le champ de la philosophie, de la rationalité, de l'humanité. (Cassin and Narcy, *La Décision du Sens*, p. 15)

The fundamental point, therefore, concerns the way Aristotle establishes that there must be an adversary who is willing to contradict the principle such that it can be demonstrated. The question is based at the same time on the exclusion of *petitio principii* and in the setting of the ultimate axiom of ontology and of traditional philosophy:

> C'est ce qui dit littéralement le grec d'Aristote: la condition pour qu'il y ait réfutation, "c'est qu'un autre soit responsable de ce qui se décrit ainsi (*tou toioutou*)" (1006a 17–18); or, "ce qui se décrit ainsi," c'est "revendiquer ce qui est dans l'*arkhê*" (1006a 17), c'est-à-dire à la fois "au depart" et "dans le principe," celui évidemment qui est en question. On n'évite donc, dit Aristote, la pétition de principe qu'en la faisant commetre à l'adversaire – entendons bien: la même. (Cassin and Narcy, *La Décision du Sens*, p. 19)

She then goes on to detail the three possible kinds of demonstration through refutation discussed by the critics, and the way Aristotle works to show them to be impossible, i.e., the ways through which he ensures the irrefutability of the principle.

The first one, called "logical refutation," would be one in which an adversary affirms, directly or indirectly, a refusal of the principle, such as "something is and is not." This adversary would be defeated by simple logic, and would be led to the principle through self-refutation: affirming that the principle is false depends on the truth of one's own assertion, whereas, if the assertion is true, it must be false at the same time. This kind of adversary, according to Aristotle, can be convinced of the principle's validity "through persuasion" (1009a 16ff., 22ff.).

The second kind, called "pragmatical refutation," is not about the content of the adversary's thesis, but about the fact that, by trying to oppose the principle, he will have to assume the dialectical role of respondent, accepting the pragmatic defense of a thesis against the principle of non-contradiction. By doing that, he is automatically carried towards it: "while he destroys an argument, he follows an argument" (1006a 26). In the two first kinds of refutation, the adversary consents to the dialectical game and ends up convinced almost as a result of a "paedagogical learning."

The third kind, which is more complex, is the "transcendental refutation." In this case, according to Aristotle, if the adversary insists on his opposition as a rebel, it is enough to make him say anything, or rather, "mean anything to himself and to another" (1006a 21):

> Dans l'équivalence entre ces deux formulations, "dire quelque chose" et signifier quelque chose," consiste toute la condition de la réfutation, qui en est en même temps la condition minimale: elle est nécessaire, non pas même pour qu'il y ait réfutation ou dialectique, mais d'abord discours. C'est ce qu'énonce, dans l'intervalle, la chaîne complète des équivalences produites par Aristote (1006a 13–15): "ne pas signifier quelque chose pour soi-même et pour autrui" = "ne pas dire quelque chose" = "ne pas avoir un discours qui porte sur quelque chose" = "n'avoir aucun discours" (ou: "qu'il n'y ait pas de discours pour lui, ni avec soi-même ni avec autrui") =

"être semblable à une plante." (Cassin and Narcy, *La Décision du Sens*, p. 24)

Therefore, it should be enough for him that a sophist with bad intentions says "good morning" meaning "good morning" and not, say, "blue," in order that he be taken to the principle "by force." The impossibility of contradiction is a result of the need for meaning. Not to mean anything, not to support a specific discourse, is to be equivalent to a plant. The violence in Aristotle's formulation can be seen in his gesture of exclusion, which is in a way a kind of a threat: "mean anything, if you are not a plant, or, accultured, speak, if you are a man" (Cassin and Narcy, *La Décision du Sens*, 27).

> Toute la stratégie d'Aristote consiste donc à prouver à ses adversaires qu'ils ne savent pas ce qu'ils disent: car s'ils se mettaient à dire ce qu'ils pensent, et même tout simplement à dire ce qu'ils font, ils finiraient tous par parler comme lui. Subsiste cependant la possibilité limite d'un dire résistant, interdisant tout pédagogie régressive par la pensée, qu'Aristote désigne par un redoublement: *legein logou kharin*, parler pour parler. C'est là, dans son lieu propre déterminé par la seule exigence de signification, que vient buter la réfutation transcendantale: de l'adversaire impossible à la réfutation impossible, l'échec de cette mise en série des moyens de persuasion oblige à recourir à la solution finale, l'exclusion hors de l'humanité. (Cassin and Narcy, *La Décision du Sens*, 42)

What does it mean, then, for Cassin, to be non-Aristotelian? It means to accept the condition of speaking for the pleasure of speaking, of not letting oneself be dragged unwillingly towards the principle of non-contradiction, but, on the contrary, opening the realm of *signifiant* without reference, of the speech of plants, of the sophistic discourse which is not "normalized" or "tamed" by Aristotle's dialectical war machine – which is in itself, in a certain sense, animated by a sophistic ghost. In our analysis, Latin literature, especially the *palliata*, will be observed from the point of view of the non-Aristotelian *other*.

Gorgias' treatise on non-being, as we saw in the prologue, is a very good example of the "speech of plants", a clear violation of the principle of non-contradiction. Aristotle's *tour de force* as analyzed above can be seen as a response to that kind of danger, as Gorgias seems to be responding to Parmenides. But another very important text by Gorgias, the *Encomium of Helen*, is also very frequently employed by Cassin[3] in order to exemplify the power of *logos* in the production of the *world-effects*, in which discourse works on an entirely different level to that of Aristotle. In