

Which voice?

Reflections around Katarina Zdjelar's work

Mladen Dolar

Let me tell a story which has nothing to do, and which has everything to do, with Katarina Zdjelar's lucid work. It goes back to the very beginning of philosophy and stages its origin. Thales of Miletus, who was reputedly the founding father of philosophy, was walking around one night, gazing at the stars – and trying to sort out the mysteries of cosmos was the first preoccupation of philosophy. With his eyes fixed on the sky he suddenly fell into a pit which he didn't notice, it was too close for his concern, and he started crying for help. A young Thracian maidservant, a slave, was luckily nearby and came to his rescue. She couldn't stop laughing at this scene of the philosopher's most unseemly fall into a hole, and she said: 'You pretend to discern the mysteries of the universe, but you can't even see what is in front of your nose.' This story has many versions, it met with a huge success, it has been retold so many times by so many people that the the European cultural history can be written through the spyglass of various ways of telling this story.

The story is very striking, it forcefully demonstrates something significant at the very birth of philosophy. It stages a maximum opposition, an antagonism, a rift, actually it is based on six oppositions. First, there is the sexual divide between the man and the woman (a young woman at that, him being presumably of mature age – can we read an undertone of sexual provocation in her laughter? Or does her laughter make him impotent, regardless of his intellectual capacities?). Second, there is the obvious opposition of rank and social standing: Thales is an aristocrat, stemming from an illustrious family which proudly traced its origins back to Cadmos – and Cadmos was Europe's brother, the brother of the unfortunate girl to whom this continent owes its name, so we are quite literally at the origin of Europe; and Cadmos was also the forefather of Oedipus, the king of Thebes, a

city founded by Cadmos, so in a way Thales is also our Oedipus, the one who solved the riddle of the Sphinx. The maid, on the other hand, is a mere slave. Accordingly, he has one of the great memorable names in history, while she is anonymous. Third, he is a Greek from one of the most prosperous town-states at the time, while she is an immigrant, the imported labour force, what is in Germany called *Gastarbeiter* (or what is in France called *les sans-papiers* – to coin a French pun, she was a *sans-papiers avant la lettre*). She stems from a remote province at the outskirts of the country, from Thrace, which was also the mythical home region of Dionysus and of Orpheus – who stand at the origin of theatre and poetry. The Thracian maid may well come from a region which was considered uncivilized by the Greeks, but nevertheless she has her compatriot deities on her side, none less than Dionysus and Orpheus. Fourth, there is the glaring difference of education. Thales was arguably the man who, in the sixth century b. C., possessed the highest education available anywhere at that time, while she was deprived of any. Thales was very much aware of the significance of these first points, for one of his sayings states that he had three reasons for his gratitude to fate: “First, to have been born a man and not a wild beast; then to have been born a man and not a woman; and third, to have been born a Greek and not a barbarian.” (DL I, 33) Man, male, Greek – this is what defines the origin of philosophy. Fifth, and this is where the story acquires the value of an allegory, we have on the one hand the paradigmatic stance of philosopher, aiming at the elevated beyond, at the transcendent and the eternal, pointing away from the finite existence, to the stars which defy the passing of time and rise above our miserable worldly concerns, while the Thracian maid is thoroughly footed on earth, she is deeply ingrained in the practical and the useful, the earthly and the material. They embody the spirit vs. the body. Sixth, and most important for our purpose here, there is the opposition between the movement toward conceptuality, ideality and universality on the part of Thales, while on the other side we have the mere voice, i. e. something non-universal and non-ideal. The Thracian maid may well be a woman, a slave, an uneducated foreigner, but she is not devoid of means and resources in

this strife, and her most formidable weapon is her laughter.

Laughter is the voice at its most inarticulate, an emission of a series of uncivilized sounds, and what is more, it is tightly attached to the body, it is a physiological sound stemming from bodily convulsions, a voice that shakes the body, a seizure, a series of spasms. It is also highly contagious, it easily spreads from one body to another, almost epidemically, and it is beyond one's control, one cannot contain laughter. Yet, despite its quasi-animal nature it is a specifically human reaction, only humans can laugh, and indeed among the many proposals for the definition of the human there is also the famous one proposed by another archetypal philosopher a couple of centuries later, Aristotle: man is a laughing animal. There exists a number of non-cultural sounds and voices which betray our physiological body (belching, coughing, hiccups, farting, snoring, snorting, screaming, crying, hissing), but those are the ones that we largely share with animals. What animals can't do is to laugh. There is a paradox: laughter is thus a token of 'spirit' as something exclusively human, but inscribed into what seems to be the most physiological reaction, an unseemly one at that, rooted in our intestines. On top of that, this odd bodily token of spirit escapes being steered by our intentions. So we have a maximum opposition in our last point: what stands opposed to the concept is the amorphous voice, pitted against the most formed and articulate mode of human thought, the concept. This is not the opposition between the spirit and the body, but rather the opposition between two manifestations of spirit, the concept and the voice. The voice appears as that which cannot be diluted by the concept. It is like the concept's bodily appendix, and most tellingly, it is on the side of the woman. There is a long and heavy tradition weighing on this paradigmatic opposition, man's thought and woman's voice, something that a feminist commentary by Adriana Cavarero summed up in one sentence: 'The man thinks, the woman sings'. There is a long tradition of the woman's voice reaching back to the song of the Sirens (and to Sarah's laughter in the Bible) and reaching forth to the laughter of Medusa (by Hélène Cixous), whether seen as damnation or salvation.

We have a maximum distance between the two poles which stand in clear antagonism, and the scene appears as the vintage scene of a class struggle. There is a plot of sex, race and class being played out. The story stages the confrontation between a Greek aristocratic male, someone socially privileged to the point of having the leisure for pastimes, such as philosophy, and a multiply discriminated slave woman, tied to the material labour, yet armed with a formidable weapon of her laughter. So what side are we on, for which side does our heart beat, and last but not least, who wins in this story? Are we on the side of the concept or on the side of the maid's laughter, of the voice voicing social revolt?

The first one who retells this story is Plato, and there is no doubt about what side he is on. In one of Plato's dialogues, *Theaetetus*, Socrates, the fictional Socrates, comments on this story:

“Anyone who gives his life to philosophy is open to such mockery. ... when he is forced to talk about what lies at his feet or is before his eyes, the whole rabble will join the maidservants in laughing at him, as from inexperience he walks blindly and stumbles into every pitfall. ... In all these matters the world has the laugh of the philosopher, partly because he seems arrogant, partly because of his helpless ignorance in matters of daily life.” (174a-175b)

So Plato takes the side of the philosopher and he turns his ineptitude into a virtue: his inability to look at what lies at his feet is the very proof of his philosophical mission, which the ignorant rabble cannot possibly understand and appreciate. He lives in another kind of world beyond this one, but a world more true than the practical and material one. To expose this world to derision is to display one's own blindness: the maid is the one who is blinded, not he who doesn't see the pit.

There is a subplot to this retelling of the story, which is significantly put into the mouth of Socrates, of all people: for was not Socrates the victim of precisely such a derision, the inability on the part of the rabble to comprehend his elevated endeavour, which eventually cost him his life? Was not the germ of the trial of Socrates planted by Aristophanes, who exposed Socrates to shameless derision, to the laughter of

maidservants, in his comedy *The Clouds*? One could maintain that Aristophanes merely took over the maid's laughter and elaborated it into a stage play, his comedy is but an expansion of this same laughter: the birth of comedy out of the spirit of the Thracian maid? The allegation that Aristophanes was at the origin of the campaign of denigration which culminated in the trial is precisely what Socrates himself brings up at the beginning of his apology before the court (19c). So on this account the maid's laughter is no innocent laughter, one can read malice in it, a malicious joy at the other's misfortune, it can bear heavy consequences, it can lead to a whole-sale condemnation of philosophy's mission, and more fatefully to the annihilation of its bearers. Innocence would thus appear to be on the side of Thales, who fell into a pit just by his harmless indifference to practical concerns. He seems to be the naïve one, while the maid is shrewd and worldly.

But let us look at the story from another angle. Thales's life is veiled in mystery, just as his philosophy. Still there is a unanimity among a number of sources about one great feat that he accomplished in his life, the feat that can be dated down to the day and the minute: on 28 May 585 b. C. he allegedly predicted the eclipse of the sun. This was the first time in history that anyone did such a thing. So his star-gazing was not such a futile activity to be laughed at and easily dismissed, it amounted to a great stroke of human capacities. This was an iconic moment, for the solar eclipses were traditionally taken to be the privileged signs of divinity and divination, they were seen as miracles where a deity was displaying its superior power in an unpredictable quirk, an unexplainable breach of causality, the sensual proof of divine supremacy. To account for it as a predictable and regular natural phenomenon is to say: there are no miracles. Nature can be explained in its own terms, and this was the inaugural act of philosophy, or so the story goes. In his search for the first principles and the natural laws there was like a demotion of divinity, its dethronization.

There is a part of maid's laughter which can be expounded into a statement: Do not meddle with God's business. Do not endeavour to know more than befits the man. Do not

rise above the allotted human fate. Don't trespass. There is a warning against the human hubris, philosophy being just its new and extreme case, a warning against the attempt to cross the line which separates the human from the divine, to arrogate oneself the right to know more than it is good to know, to forget one's place and humility. He who will transgress the boundary will be punished by the fall. So the sin of Thales, in this light, was not to leave behind the earthly concerns and thus make himself the laughing stock, his true sin was the opposite: to bring stars down to earth, to turn them into something immanent and explainable, as opposed to the transcendent status they have always occupied. The concept sins by immanence, not by transcendence. The philosopher's elevated pointing to the transcendent had a flipside: to bring the transcendent to a concept, not to leave it to the myth – and the maid's laughter may be taken as ultimately endorsing the myth. The concept has the power to tame deities and stars, if it cannot quite tame the pit at one's feet.

On this account it appears that it is the philosopher who has the last laugh in this story and emerges as the winner who eventually gets the upper hand, notwithstanding the fall into the pit. His concept will prevail. So Thales's story would thus stand at the beginning of the triumphant progress of knowledge to be accomplished over centuries and millennia, epitomized by science and philosophy, the most massive of all success stories. The part of truth that lies in his star-gazing, in the philosophical concept and its universality, is retroactively and dramatically attested and vindicated by the colossal development of 'civilization as we know it'.

Yet, one can well see that this spectacular success story of the progress of knowledge is far from being the whole story, and that this story, simple as it is, has multiple entries and multiple exits. It is a story involving a contradiction. If there is a part of truth in the concept, the universal and ideal entity that could be produced by scrutinizing the beyond, the part that the laughing maid literally 'had no concept of', then there is another moment of truth, another kind of truth, on the part of the laughter of the maid. It evokes the part of the social rift, the sexual, racial and class divide, the part of the voice and the

singularity. Her laughter cannot be silenced, and she cannot be quite reduced to the ignorant rabble. The questions of class, sex and voice resonate in that laughter, and they keep boring holes into the narrative of the progress of knowledge. For whom does our heart beat? There is no simple way to simply endorse the laughing maid and to maintain the inherent subversion of her laughter, as opposed to the male philosophical logic and its complicity with domination. And one cannot simply endorse the philosopher and his worldhistorical success, for the history he inaugurated was an inextricably antagonistic history of oppression, a history of class struggles, to speak with Marx, and its universality entailed a rift. Is it possible to hold on to both ends at once? To the concept and the voice? To universality and the rift? To the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' part of the story? Is it the same story? To put it bluntly, in one simple slogan: one never can, one always must. The point is not 'don't laugh at philosophers, this is not a laughing matter, they should be taken seriously' – god knows that they do need it. The point is also not to endorse the laughing maid, for laughter as such is not simply salutary and can be far from innocent. The point is rather to hold on to both threads, irreconcilable as they seem to be, to work with their divergence, at their impossible interface.

This story, simple as it is, brings forth three philosophical objects in one go. The first object is the object star: the object of contemplation, the object of theory as *theorein*, intuiting the essence. It is the object as eternal, containing the eidos, the endurable form and its law. It's not just the stars – each object of philosophical scrutiny would have to be treated on the model of the star, to disentangle what is eternal and universal in it. The second object is the object hole, the pit, the abyss. It is a crack that opens in the midst of the worldly and the practical, a negative object, a hole in the midst of being, a negativity in the continuity of things. Not seeing this hole and falling into it is not just accidental and anecdotic, it hangs together with the ability to see the first object. It is constitutive of the subject position, and one could say, somewhat enigmatically, that the subject is this hole in the being, the abyss into which a man of flesh and blood falls to become a subject. The

third object presents itself as the laughter of this maid, the woman, the immigrant, the slave. This is not quite the object that philosophy intended, not a glamorous object, which emerges at the very birth of philosophy as its sideshow, unexpected yet essential. The object as a surplus, an additional object, but which creates the scene of philosophy and establishes its staging. The Thracian maid is crucial for this staging of philosophy as its audience and its unforeseen participant. It is she who turns the concept into a theater. Her laughter evokes the otherness of sex, of social antagonism, the voice, the body, the singularity, the enjoyment – an object emerging in the rift of the universal. The star, the hole and the laughing woman's voice – how do these three objects hang together? How can one encompass them in the same conceptual endeavour, as they are contingently comprised in this anecdote? There is a triple task of philosophy: not to give up on the star, on the universal, on the concept, on the *eidos*; not to give up on negativity and on the subject; and not to give up on the object voice, on the laughing maid, on the rift.

Katarina Zdjelar's remarkable and subtle work at its core deals with this: staging the contradictory field of forces which sustains the voice and its social underpinnings, the voice and the social mold.

The situation it scrutinizes in 'The perfect sound' stages two voices: one which directs and molds and the one which is directed and molded, and we hear the strife, the duet, the antiphony of the two. We have a teacher and a pupil, who obviously differ in their age and their social status. This is a language school, not school teaching language, but a school teaching the proper sound, teaching how to purify the voice of any accent. There is the voice which leads the game and the voice which responds, and the responding voice can never quite measure up to the first one. The leading voice is the standard, the responding voice tries to emulate it, never quite succeeding.

The piece enacts the drama of every voice by the simplest of means. It re-enacts the initial drama of a baby grappling with the voice of the other, the mother's voice, the voice

of the adult, which tries to inculcate the norm into the unruly voice of the supposed nature, to bend the natural hang, to ply the unpliant. It is a permanent drama, one is never quite a competent speaker, one's voice is never quite tamed and brought under control.

The two voices are in structural inequality. This is a scene of mastery and class struggle: the leading voice presents the socially accepted, the supposedly neutral, the model, but which has become a model by erasing the strife which has put it in this position. The ruling accent is an accent which is proclaimed to be non-accent; it is the decontaminated voice, obfuscating the process by which its particularity has been installed as universal. One voice is the voice of universality, the other is confined and limited by its origin, it shows the unerased traces of where it comes from. Its roots have to be deracinated. There is nothing neutral in language, and this holds not merely for vocabulary, syntax and meaning, it is most poignantly true of each sound, before we ever start composing words and meanings. What we witness is the manufacturing of neutrality, the hard labour of producing neutral sound – a contradiction in terms.

The teacher is very well-mannered, well-intentioned, urbane, displaying a lot of good will and patience toward the pupil, he is obviously skilled and has a long practice behind him, many years of experience to support his moves. The young man is docile, he is an apt and eager pupil, with great motivation to learn, to submit himself to everything necessary for the social dressing. One can surmise that he is an immigrant eager for social promotion, for the erasure of the vestiges of his origin, with great hopes for future prospects. The ideal immigrant so eager to adapt – this is the way we love them, and the teacher ever so eager to help. This is a scene of a perfect teacher and a perfect pupil in view of a perfect sound. Since this is an English language school, designed not to teach language but the proper accent, in the English environment so meticulously conscious of class distinction and of what is called the Queen's English, with the specter of Oxbridge on the horizon, it inevitably brings to mind the tribulations of Eliza Doolittle and the haughtiness of Professor Higgins, transposed into an aseptic environment of a rarefied abstract space,

with the colourful Covent Garden flower girl now replaced by a host of nameless immigrants. It is like a new avatar of Audrey Hepburn tortured by the sound machine and by the suave condescension of Rex Harrison, yet, most tellingly, without her display of defiance and frustrated pride and with the teacher abiding by the high standards of professional composure, staying confidently clear of any display of hauteur. The comparison of the two scenes, almost a century apart, speaks volumes about the social progress and its assumptions.

One thing remains to be said at the end, a crucial one. This is a scene of class struggle fought on the battleground of language and voice, precisely at the intersection of the two. It is where the one cuts into the other that the class comes in, it grabs you by your voice before it ever comes to meaning. Yet, it would be wrong to see the cultural code to be incrustated simply as the means of oppression, and the voice as the means of expression and resistance; it would be romantic to glorify the diversity of voices and accents and regret the impositions of the social. There is no way of simply going back to espousing the voice as the locus of freedom against the repression of the suffocating mold, and there is no simple way of giving up on mastering social and cultural codes despite their profound complicity with class. There is no voice without a mold, without contradiction, and there is no simple way of getting out of this predicament, the strife which brings together the individual and the social, singular and universal, body and culture, enjoyment and code, saliva and phonemes, all these in the harsh light of class division. To scrutinize this nexus with patience, perspicacity, wit and subtlety, as Katarina Zdjelar does, is the first step towards conceiving new ways of a politics of emancipation.

This feat has indeed been accomplished by the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg, who has written a wonderful booklet called *Das Lachen der Thrakerin. Eine Urgeschichte der Theory* (The laughter of the Thracian maid. A fore-history of theory), Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1987.

PAGE

PAGE 8