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Source: *Mnemosyne*, 1961, Fourth Series, Vol. 14, Fasc. 4 (1961), pp. 289-295

Published by: Brill

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4428537>

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ON ΤΡΑΓΙΚΗ: PLATO, *MENO* 76^E

BY

R. S. BLUCK

At *Meno* 75 b, in illustrating the sort of answer he would like to his inquiry about the nature of ἀρετή, Socrates says that shape (σχῆμα) is that which always accompanies colour. But since colour has not been defined, he has to give another description of shape: it is the 'limit of a solid' (στερεοῦ πέρας, 76a). Then, asked to say what colour is, he gives an answer κατὰ Γοργίαν (76c), to the effect that colour is an effluence of shapes (ἀπορροή σχημάτων), suitable for our vision and perceptible (76d). Meno likes this answer, and Socrates remarks that it was τραγική, 'so that you like it better than the one about shape', though in reality the latter (i.e., presumably, the *second* description of shape) was better.

Editors have usually taken the epithet τραγική as an allusion either to the grandiose style of the description of colour, or to the loftiness of the subject-matter. In *Classical Review* 34 (1920), p. 31, however, F. A. Wright argued that the words used 'are the technical jargon of the scientific laboratory, not the archaic diction of the poetical drama'. Claiming that σχήματα, ὄψις and σύμμετρος could all be used as technical terms in connexion with the theatre, he took τραγική to mean 'theatrical', '*pertaining to the stage*'. In the same volume of the same journal, p. 101, W. C. F. Anderson replied that these words were not used so much in that way as naturally to remind the reader of the stage, and claimed that τραγική was intended solely to emphasize that in offering the definition Socrates had assumed the character of Gorgias. 'The sense is, "Please remember that I am speaking in the character of Gorgias"'. The actor's mask for Gorgias would surely be a tragic one'. But Meno is said to have liked the definition because it was τραγική, and the word τραγική thus interpreted, even when what precedes is taken into account, could hardly mean 'spoken in the character of Gorgias'; it could only mean 'spoken when I was assuming a

character', and that could hardly account for Meno's preference, unless he were supposed to prefer anything said by anyone else to anything said by Socrates. In any case, *τραγική* must surely have a little more point than Anderson suggests.

A different sort of explanation of the word has been given by M. Grimal and more recently by Professor Rosenmeyer, and it is their interpretations in particular that I wish to criticize. In *Revue des Études Grecques* 55 (1942), pp. 1-13, M. Edmonde Grimal argues that Socrates' failure to share Meno's enthusiasm for the account of colour is due to its possessing 'la fausse clarté de toutes les doctrines matérialistes, qui leur vient de ce qu'elles parlent exclusivement à l'imagination, au moyen d'images concrètes, empruntées au monde visible et tangible'—just as tragedy presents 'des événements vraisemblables' which need not really happen (pp. 4-5). 'Le reproche fondamental fait par Socrate' is that the definition of colour is '*mythique*, c'est-à-dire qu'elle n'est susceptible que d'une vérité probable, provisoire, conjecturale'—and in that respect like tragedy which, for a Greek of Plato's day, was 'un mythe mis en action et porté à la scène' (p. 8). The description of colour was only 'une description plausible du mécanisme de la perception, une façon commode de présenter les choses, tout comme le rapt de Koré est la figuration sensible de la vérité à laquelle vont être initiés les fidèles, mais non cette vérité même'; it was deficient in that it did not express, as the definition of *σχῆμα* did, 'les rapports intellectuels éternels qui unissent réellement deux concepts' (p. 8). Indeed, it is impossible to give a definition of colour 'aussi parfaite que l'était celle de la forme'. Colour, which belongs to the world of sense, cannot be defined in the same way as the eternal realities which mathematicians study, and that is why Socrates calls the present description not 'false' but simply 'less good' than the other one. He even finds in it 'un mérite positif, celui de fournir un principe d'explication universel pour la perception sensible, de s'appliquer non seulement à la vue, mais encore à l'ouïe, à l'odorat et à "mainte autre chose analogue"' (p. 9; see 76 d-e). But no definition of colour, or of anything physical, can be 'good', because such things are not, in Plato's view, objects of knowledge (p. 10); any such definition must be 'tragique'.

In short, on Grimal's view the description of colour which Socrates gives is deficient because it is a description of something sensible, and therefore relies on reference to the material world, and is therefore necessarily 'mythique'; and it is in this sense that Socrates calls it *τραγική*.

A somewhat similar view has been expressed more recently by Professor Rosenmeyer, in *American Journal of Philology* 76 (1955), pp. 226-7. Of the word *τραγικός*, he writes: 'Some kind of tension between beast and man was undoubtedly involved in its earlier use, and this connotation of *double entendre* seems to have remained with it'. And of our passage he writes: 'His [Socrates'] answer, far from being a definition at all, was "tragic" . . . Wilamowitz [*Platon* II, Berlin, 1930, p. 146] compares the passage with two others in the *Republic* (413a-b, and 545e) and arrives at a meaning tantamount to *ainigmatodes*, "ambiguous", which is not too far removed from our "double entendre". When Socrates' interlocutor confesses that he cannot follow the argument, Socrates is prepared to admit that he has expressed himself *tragikōs*, obscurely (*Rep.* 413a-b). Mental befuddlement seems to be the principal notion associated with this use of the word "tragic"; cf. similar instances in comedy. And always, there lurks behind it the suspicion of downright deceit'. Thus Rosenmeyer too takes Socrates to be not merely hinting, but explicitly asserting, with the word *τραγικῶς*, that the definition in question was unsatisfactory.

Now it is illegitimate to assume, as Grimal does, that in defining colour Socrates is defining something different in kind from *σχῆμα* — something sensible as opposed to an 'eternal reality'. Colours are visible, but Plato may have envisaged an invisible Form of Colour; if we are not here concerned with Platonic (*χωριστά*) Forms, at least we are concerned with the *ἐν εἶδος*, with *τὸ ἐπὶ πᾶσιν . . . τὰντόν*, both in regard to *σχῆμα* and in regard to *χρῶμα*; there is no reason why one *εἶδος* should be perceptible and the other not, and hence there is no reason why a definition of the one should be *necessarily* inferior to a definition of the other. Nevertheless, it remains true that the description of colour here given is materialistic—or (better) *mechanistic*; and that is no doubt the main reason why Socrates prefers the description of *σχῆμα* which explained *σχῆμα* in terms of

a function (that of limiting a solid) ¹). But is it also why Socrates calls the description of colour *τραγική*? Meno likes this definition because it is *τραγική*. But there is no need to suppose that the reason behind Socrates' preference for definition A is the same as Meno's reason for preferring definition B. Indeed, if *τραγική* virtually means 'mythique', the 'mythical' or conjectural nature of a definition could afford no positive ground for Meno's preference, however liable he might be to *confuse* what is conjectural with what is true. Nor could the 'ambiguity' of a definition afford such a ground. Further, Socrates has already stated clearly what *is* probably the reason for Meno's preference—*ἴσως γάρ σοι κατὰ συνήθειαν εἴρηται*: and this remark is no doubt to be associated with the original offer to reply *κατὰ Γοργίαν*—*ἧ ἂν σὺ μάλιστα ἀκολουθήσῃς*. It is natural to suppose that this is the reason, and the only reason, for Meno's preference, and that the full and complete explanation of *τραγική* must lie here.

Now according to Grimal the 'reproach' against Gorgias implied in the association of the definition of colour with him consists not only in 'underlining the fault' of trying to combine a pluralist physics with the 'monistic dialectic of Zeno' (p. 11), but also in the suggestion that he confused the true with the false or the plausible or the 'tragique', and caused his pupils to fall into similar confusion (p. 12). But the ascription to Gorgias of 'the monistic dialectic of Zeno' rests on the assumption that the treatise *On the nature of not-being* was written in all seriousness, which is doubtful (cf. Dodds, ed. *Gorgias*, p. 8); and in any case it is wrong to assert that 'Platon s'amuse ici a souligner ce défaut'—that of combining incompatible beliefs—since there is no mention here at all of any belief save that in Empedoclean 'pores'. And the more important suggestion—that calling the reply *κατὰ Γοργίαν* '*τραγική*' means first and foremost that it is 'mythique'—and means this so obviously that the alleged reproach against Gorgias of confusing what is true with what is false or plausible would be understood

1) Cf. *Phaedo* 97b sq., esp. 98a-b. Another reason may be that so many things could be described in terms of *ἀπορροαί*, as is indicated, perhaps pointedly, by Socrates at 76d ad fin. (though Grimal, as we have seen, thinks that this is seriously regarded as 'un mérite positif').

by any reader—is surely unacceptable, as any interpretation of *τραγική* must be which gives it (as does Rosenmeyer's) a distinctly and obviously pejorative sense. The passage clearly indicates that Meno likes best, *because* he is *used to* and can *follow best*, something that is *τραγική*: and though he may be used to mechanistic explanations which are necessarily 'mythical', or indeed to Gorgian 'ambiguities', it would be odd for Socrates to say outright that Meno is used to and can follow best what is 'mythical' or ambiguous; and if he did say this, we should expect Meno, in reply, not simply to agree that he likes such explanations better than others, but to object to Socrates' calling his preference *τραγική*. Yet all he says is *Ἐμοιγε*.

Furthermore, and despite Wilamowitz's remarks cited by Rosenmeyer, the metaphorical *τραγικός* in Plato seems never to allude *necessarily* either to what is 'mythical' or 'conjectural', or to what is 'ambiguous' or 'obscure' (= 'muddled'); in fact, it probably refers *usually* to what is high-flown or grandiose, and perhaps in some way difficult. This interpretation is quite possible at *Rep.* 413a-b, where *τραγικῶς λέγειν* refers to the use of metaphors which Glaucon cannot understand, whereas the sense 'mythical' or 'conjectural' is not possible. At *Rep.* 545e *τραγικῶς* is associated with *ὑψηλολογουμένας λέγειν*. Socrates is suggesting that they should invoke the Muses to tell how the fall of the ideal state might come about, and his words are: *ἢ βούλει, ὥσπερ Ὀμηρος, εὐχόμεθα ταῖς Μούσαις εἰπεῖν ἡμῖν ὅπως δὴ πρῶτον στάσις ἔμπεσε, καὶ φῶμεν αὐτάς τραγικῶς ὡς πρὸς παιῖδας ἡμᾶς παιζούσας καὶ ἐρεσχηλούσας, ὡς δὴ σπουδῇ λεγούσας, ὑψηλολογουμένας λέγειν*; Cornford translates this: 'Shall we, like Homer, invoke the Muses to tell us "how first division came"', and imagine them amusing themselves at our expense by talking in high-flown language, as one teases a child with a pretence of being in earnest?' And Shorey takes *τραγικῶς . . . ὡς δὴ σπουδῇ λεγούσας ὑψηλολογουμένας* to mean, 'in lofty, mock-serious tragic style'. If *ὡς δὴ σπουδῇ λεγούσας* in fact carries the sort of irony that these translators assume, either the 'mythical'/conjectural or the ambiguous/obscure (= muddled) interpretation of *τραγικῶς* would seem to be possible, at least at first sight. But none of these meanings seems at all suitable when we find it agreed shortly afterwards (547a ad fin.) that what the Muses say is correct (*ὀρθῶς*), and that

they needs must speak correctly because they are Muses.¹⁾ It looks as though τραγικῶς must mean simply 'in their grandiose way'—implying, probably, a certain amount of *difficulty*, but no uncertainty or muddleheadedness, and certainly no 'suspicion of downright deceit'. The full meaning of τραγικόν at *Crat.* 408c is difficult to determine precisely, but at least the passage provides no evidence against the present thesis. There Socrates says that speech (in general) is διπλοῦς, ἀληθής τε καὶ ψευδής . . . τὸ μὲν ἀληθὲς αὐτοῦ λεῖον καὶ θεῖον καὶ ἄνω οἰκοῦν ἐν τοῖς θεοῖς, τὸ δὲ ψεῦδος κάτω ἐν τοῖς πολλοῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ τραχὺ καὶ τραγικόν· ἐνταῦθα γὰρ πλεῖστοι οἱ μῦθοί τε καὶ τὰ ψεύδη ἐστίν, περὶ τὸν τραγικὸν βίον. Socrates is clearly playing on the derivation of τραγικόν, which is here contrasted with θεῖον and means primarily 'goat-like'. There may be a 'double entendre', especially in the words περὶ τὸν τραγικὸν βίον, but if so the secondary meaning may be 'tragic', not in the sense 'befuddled', but in the sense 'fraught with such calamities as occur on the stage'; and that sense might be one that would be understandable only because of the special context, and not one that would naturally suggest itself whenever the word was used metaphorically. *Philebus* 48a, which Rosenmeyer quotes as an example of τραγικός implying ambiguity, is again, surely, non-evidential. To find such an implication is to import that idea from the context into the meaning of the word, which here is probably not metaphorical at all and means simply (as the γέ suggests) 'at tragedies': Καὶ μὴν καὶ τάς γε τραγικάς θεωρήσεις, ὅταν ἅμα χαίροντες κλάωσι, μέμνησαι;

Hence, it would seem, we are constrained by the context to take the meaning at 76e to be that the definition of colour was 'high-flown'; and we are justified linguistically in so taking it. Moreover there are references elsewhere in Plato to the pretentious style of Gorgias—Agathon's speech in the *Symposium* reminds Socrates of it (198c), and at *Gorg.* 467b Socrates says to Gorgias ἵνα προσείπω σε κατὰ σέ, in allusion to the jingle ὦ λῶστέ Πῶλε²⁾. It is true, of course, that the language of the definition of colour may be scientific

1) 'And we shall affirm', he said, 'that the Muses answer quite correctly'. 'They needs must', I said, 'since they are Muses'.

2) Cf. also e.g., Xenophon *Symp.* II 26 ἀνδὲ ἡμῖν οἱ παῖδες μικραῖς κύλιξι πυκνὰ ἐπιψακάζωσιν, ἵνα καὶ ἐγὼ ἐν Γοργείοις ῥήμασιν εἶπω . . .

or quasi-scientific rather than 'the archaic diction of the poetical drama', but it is still comparable to tragedy inasmuch as it is grandiose. It may, indeed, be largely borrowed from Empedocles, if not (as Burnet held, *EGP*⁴, pp. 248-9) actually quoted from him ¹); but Diogenes Laertius (viii, 70) attributes to Empedocles a *τραγικὸν τύπον*, and if the words here described as *κατὰ Γοργίαν* are in fact derived from Empedocles, they need be none the less typical of Gorgias, who probably borrowed a good deal from his compatriot. If there is an allusion in *τραγική*—as there probably is—to the subject-matter as well, it is likely to be an ironical allusion to the 'grandiose' nature of that subject-matter, and to its 'difficulty'. We may perhaps compare *Phaedo* 102d, where Socrates says with a smile, "Εοικα καὶ συγγραφικῶς ἐρεῖν—referring, probably, to his use of uncommon or difficult expressions, *necessitated by the subject-matter*, which sound pretentious. Grimal considers that the Empedoclean theory of colour is 'simple' (p. 3), but it is characteristic of Socrates to treat any materialistic or mechanistic theory as difficult (cf. *Phaedo* 101c ad fin.). In all probability, then, the early editors were right, and *τραγική* in our present passage alludes not to the 'mythical' or conjectural nature of the definition of colour, which results from its being mechanistic and concentrating on the world of sense—the defect which causes Socrates to prefer the definition of *σχῆμα*—nor to its being ambiguous or obscure (in the sense of 'muddled'), but to its high-flown language and to what Socrates chooses to treat as its grandeur or profundity. *These* are the qualities that make it Gorgian, and at the same time cause Meno to admire it.

1) The word *ἀπορροή* may be regarded as poetic: its only occurrence before Plato is at Euripides, *Hec.* 1587, while in Plato it occurs only in poetical or semi-prophetic passages such as *Phaedrus* 251 sq. and in the *Timaeus* (Grimal, pp. 5-6). Likewise the use of *αἰσθητός* as a feminine form may be Empedoclean, though of course it may be (Grimal, p. 7) Platonic imitation. For *σχημάτων* T has γρ. *χρημάτων* in the margin, and in the comparable definition of colour at *Tim.* 67c we find *σωμάτων*, which H. Richards (*Platonica*, p. 44) would read in our *Meno* passage. Perhaps Empedocles talked about *ἀπορροαί* of *things* (or conceivably of *bodies*), but Plato chose to speak of effluences of *σχήματα* because *σχῆμα* had been defined whereas *χρῆμα* and *σῶμα* had not. If it be asked how a *σχῆμα* as defined at 76a could have *ἀπορροαί*, we may note that it probably could according to the Pythagorean conception of a *πέρας*: cf. Aristotle *de sensu* 3, 439a 30, τὸ γὰρ χρῶμα ἢ ἐν τῷ πέρατι ἐστὶν ἢ πέρας. διὸ καὶ οἱ Πυθαγόρειοι τὴν ἐπιφάνειαν χροῖαν ἐκάλουν.