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Once upon an argument: Being the account of a dialogue between a poet and a philosopher, both ancient

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Poet: Were I (who to my cost already am

One of those strange prodigious creatures *Man*.)

A Spirit free, to choose for my own share,

What Case of Flesh and Blood, I pleas'd to weare,

I'd be a *Dog*, a *Monkey*, or a *Bear*,

Or any thing but that vain *Animal*,

Who is so proud of being rational.

The senses are too gross, and he'll contrive

A sixth to contradict the other Five;

And before certain instinct, will preferr,

Reason, which Fifty times for one does err.

Philosopher: You see, that is precisely why poets are potentially so dangerous, and why they should be carefully watched, especially in any society in which the voices of the many have some say. The saving grace is the fact that no one of any intellectual moment pays any real attention to either poets or poetry nowadays--preferring their descendants, the propagandists of commerce--so there is no harm in allowing poets free range, even in such a supposedly serious intellectual community as is afforded by our academies.

But alas, in these degraded times, too few take philosophers seriously either, and the great argument between poets and philosophers only smolders when it should burn with fiery passion.

Poet: There is no argument between us. *We* have no argument; *You* have an argument. The only arguments are the ones--did I hear three or four--that you raise against me. I do not argue.

Phil.: Well and good! If there is no argument between us, then there is no disagreement. And where there is no disagreement, there is agreement. Thus, I can only conclude that you agree with me. Don't you?

Poet: Do I?

Phil.: You agree that we disagree, so there is indeed an argument between us.

Poet: But wait. If I agree with you now that we argue, then the disagreement disappears--and where there is no disagreement, there is no argument--so in the end we do <u>not</u> argue!

Two can play at your word games. Still, I choose not to argue. I prefer to put my words to different uses.

Phil.: Your denial rests on a clever equivocation. Surely, you would admit that the argument one person presents is different than the argument that engages two. Still, I must admit that you show a mastery of the language of argumentation.

Poet: Well, language is, after all, my specialty. However, I must credit Protagoras, one of your own, for this particular rejoinder.

Phil.: Not all philosophers are so eager to claim him as one of their own. He is too clever by half, but I suspect that he is *only* clever.

Poet: Since when is cleverness with words a failing? Even the Philosopher himself considers mastery of metaphor a sign of genius! I think you are unduly suspicious, and that can get in the way of learning. You *listen* only to dispute, so you will never be able to *hear* the wisdom others have to offer. Come, let me tell you a story…

Phil.: No! If there is something you would teach me, tell it to me directly, without the extravagances of art. The Truth can stand critical scrutiny. It needs no embellishment; it need not hide behind the trappings of a story. Tell me what you would have me learn.

Poet: Yes, I would teach you, but not all that can be taught must be taught directly. What if I would teach a *téchné*, not *episteme*?

Phil.: If what you mean by *téchné* is what Homer and Hesiod and the old poets meant--mastery of a craft--then you are right, but philosophers are more wont to recognize that true *téchné* must be accompanied by *episteme*. In any case, I should be more careful with my words here. When I asked if there was "something" that you would teach, what I meant was, if there is a "some-*what*," and not a "some-*how*"…

Poet: If you are now more concerned with your language, and the importance of choosing just the right words for communication, then you have already learned a great deal. And, I might add, without my telling you. If you understand the importance of just the right word for teaching, then perhaps you can begin to sense its importance for all the other things that we do with language--including arguing and telling stories. And once you appreciate that, then the art of putting the best possible words in the best possible order is within reach. That is poetry.

Phil.: Yes, I know: "The poet presents his thoughts festively, on the carriage of rhythm… [but] usually because they could not walk."

Sometimes I think that you poets get too caught up in rhyme and meter and imagery,

forgetting all the while that what makes words best is simply that they express the Truth.

Poet: Listen to my story. Perhaps it will be an answer.

Phil.: I grant that a story might be able to teach an Art--even the art of living--by offering an example, a model to follow, but what can a story contribute to reasoned debate? It can only seduce the senses, capture the imagination, or play with the emotions.

Poet: So are you saying that poets, *qua* poets, have no Reason at all?

If not to argue you call Treason,

And poets offer no excuse.

Then we're left bereft of Reason,

Strangers in the Land of *Nous*

But at least be gracious enough to admit that I was right all along, because if we poets have no arguments, then perforce we have no arguments *with* philosophers. And, that being the case, I shall take my leave.

Phil.: Even you can't seriously offer that as reason. You equivocate unconscionably between arguments as carefully structured reasoning and arguments as merely competitive wordplay. Come back here and *argue like a philosopher!*

Poet: Contrary-wise, why don't you walk with me and *rhapsodize like a poet!* Surely it's a more enjoyable way to share each other's company.

Phil.: Irresponsible rhymester! Image-monger!

Poet: *Ad Hominen! Ad Hominem!* How delightful! How eristic! Can I play, too? Now let me see… I know: Pedantic logophile! Fatuous conceptualist! Phallocentric dogmatist! No, No, wait a second, the muse has come…

Nitpicking hairsplitter,

Lost in the maze of market stalls,

Stops to ponder,

Whether he dreams these walls.

Proof eludes, frozen in wonder…

Darkness falls.

Phil.: *That* is supposed to teach me something? A witty verse it may be but you are playing to the wrong audience.

Speaking of which, it seems to me that an audience is something you need. Is that right? Do you languish if no one listens? The achievement of Philosophy is wisdom, and that is its own reward, even for the solitary philosopher. The achievement of poetry is pretty tropes, of little value when there are no others around to enjoy them.

I am not surprised that your words are clever. I expect no less from our poets--but as a philosopher, I hunger for more. I seek after Knowledge and Truth, Understanding and Wisdom. Do you see *nothing* noble in that pursuit so that it deserves ridicule from those who do not hear its call?

Poet: It is the sirens' call. They would lead you astray from our company. You cannot leave this ship.

Phil.: Getting lost isn't the only danger sailors face. What if the ship flounders, runs aground, or takes on too much water? A safe port for repair is sometimes needed.

Poet: Touché! You have turned my own metaphor back on me. I am sure there is a term for it in the *téchné* of the rhetoricians. Quite the masterstroke and worthy of a true poet. You've been wasting your talents chasing the rainbow. Welcome to the fraternity.

Phil.: Thank you, but I must decline. I have not argued anything here…

Poet: Who asked you to argue?

Phil.: Apparently, I have only traded words with a clever simpleton. There is no gain in besting a fool in argument.

Poet: Then why argue with a fool in the first place?

Phil.: A good question--and I have a good answer. Because, as you've just now shown, even a fool can occasionally ask a good question.

You see, I do not argue to win. Rather, I argue to learn. I submit my thoughts and opinions to the crucible of argumentation, to make them stronger, more complete, more articulate--in sum, to get closer to the Truth. Argument is how we get there. An argument may "prove" its conclusion in either sense: it may test it or it may establish it. As a philosopher, I am accountable to reason, and only to reason--not to any opponent in debate; nor to any audience; it is neither judge nor jury that can justly weigh my words, although I hope they can be my guides, helping me to judge rightly for myself.

Let me ask you a question: What is the measure of a poem? To whom are you accountable?

Poet: Me? At this moment? Me. Myself. My craft. The story. This moment. The audience… Why, then I am accountable to you. There is no other. Aren't we alone?

All I ask is that you give me fair hearing before rendering your judgment. Let me tell my story.

Phil.: You leave it up to me, then? If I disapprove, or deny, or reject your story, then you will have lost--and acknowledge as much? If I am the sole judge and jury, how can I not but like the odds!

Poet: Will I have lost? What is it to lose when there is no contest? I will have failed, yes, in some sense. And yes, at this moment you are the sole judge of my argument…

*Phil.***:** Your argument! You mean your story.

*Poet***:** As you wish, but arguments are stories. As I said, for now, you are the entire audience for my words, the only one that matters. There may be others in the course of time, but really they do not matter because the story changes with each new telling. And with each new hearing. Even the same story can yet be very different.

Phil.: Paradoxes and riddles!

Poet: And one more thing, my friend. Do not forget <u>your</u> calling, your personal accountability to reason. I know you suppose me irrational and impervious to all reason, and you think, therefore, that you cannot give me reasons to be reasonable, but I do know how very important it is to you. And believe it or not, it is important to me, too.

Phil.: You are right. I will listen and try to give you a fair hearing. That is your due.

Poet: My story, then. Or, if you prefer, my argument--but as a story.

Once upon a time there was a philosopher who was thought to be the wisest of all because his wisdom consisted in knowing that he knew nothing. Of course, there are always very many who know nothing, so that by itself is no great distinction. It is believing that about yourself that is the trick. In his time, as in our own, many of the ignorant arrogantly thought that they did know, and so they were not wise. Nor were they very good, and in the end they killed our philosopher. This story, you see, is a tragedy.

Phil.: I would be a poor student of philosophy if I did not recognize the life of Socrates. But it is a true part of our past. It is history and not a mere story at all.

Poet: Previously you complained that stories were not true so they could not contribute to human knowledge. Now you complain that this story <u>is</u> true. No matter. It is a story, but stories can be "true." Whether a story is true or not, however, does not matter. What does matter about stories is that they do matter, that they be *important*. One way for a story to be important is to tell a truth, but that is not the only way. At any rate, let me continue with my story.

As I said, this story is a tragedy, but not because it ends badly, but because it ends badly precisely because our hero was tragically flawed. His flaw was that while he was wise in the ways of the world and even wise in the ways of *Man*, our philosopher was perhaps not so wise in the ways of *men*. He knew the measure of all things and he saw very deeply into human nature. He knew what it was to be a rational animal in the order of the greater cosmos, but alas, he himself lived not in a cosmos but in a world of chaos, and his

fellow inhabitants in that messy world were not always rational animals. They did not know about Human Nature as he did, and so they did not live as he did, and as humans ought. And yet they were humans nonetheless. They were like the storied bumblebees who fly blithely on their way, never knowing that by aerodynamical rights, they should be incapable of flying. He was, alas, too rational for this world.

Phil.: But then it is the city-state and the other citizens that are flawed. The tragedy is that the world is flawed, not he. We need to change the world.

Poet: Wait. The reason I say he was not so wise in the ways of men is that he took it upon himself to expose the ignorance of the arrogant, and in so doing, he made powerful enemies. Shouldn't a student of human nature have been able to expect that his provocative action would meet with excessive reaction? Even a fool such as I could have seen that he was heading toward a bad end.

Phil.: You're missing the point. His arguments were for everyone, the ages, not just for the least adept among us. He was accountable to eternal Reason, not to the audience of his day.

*Poet***:** You're right, but that is my point. As his nursemaid once remarked, he did not play well with others. Instead, he argued, which is not always the best way to relate to others. He loved to argue and couldn't resist doing so at every available opportunity, even with his playmates. What makes this a problem is that pretty much <u>any</u> occasion can be turned into an opportunity to argue.

In sum: our philosopher's tragic flaw was argumentativeness. Well, not just argumentativeness *per se*, but *argumentative* argumentativeness. Did I say he argued well? That is not quite right. Remember that arguments are also stories and while he may have argued reasonably, he did not argue well because he was not good at telling stories.

Phil.: Again you're missing the point. His actions were deliberate. Even when it seems that it might have been inappropriate to argue, he knew what he was doing.

Poet: Do you really think so? What *was* he doing?

Phil.: He was trying to teach. He was showing the way to be human, how to live a life worthy of a rational being. Above all, he was trying to help the rest of us not to lose faith in argument. *That* would be a tragedy.

Poet: Well, then he wasn't a very good teacher, was he? That is my point. Good arguments need to be good stories, so good arguers need to be good story tellers. You see, in my story, his arguments didn't work and his love of argument didn't take root among his fellow citizens. They were not, shall we say, "model interlocutors," so no doubt they deserve much of the blame for the tragedy. But so does he, because it was his arguments--his *arguing*--that caused the trouble. He was arrested and tried and executed for his deeds. At each stage of the ordeal, there were escapes for our philosopher--choices that would have allowed him to continue his life's mission with honor and integrity,

and even choices that would have furthered that mission. Alas, while he may have had enough reason to construct fine arguments, he had too little imagination to tell a good story. He could find no exit. Do you imagine that the wily Odysseus would ever have found himself in this positon?

Phil.: Odysseus was a different sort of hero--a soldier and adventurer, but also a thief and a liar. He is not a role model on how to live the good life.

Poet: Why do you call clever Odysseus a liar? Because he told stories? But they were not lies meant to deceive. They were stories meant to entertain and explain and serve the purposes of the wayfarer and fulfill the duties of a supplicant guest. Surely, that's reasonable. You can't really believe his hosts thought those marvelous stories of monsters and gods were literal truth. Since the imperatives of hospitality prevented them from challenging his stories, he was relieved of the imperatives of truth-telling--and so became subject to the very different imperatives of story-telling. He is a fine role model… for story-telling. And they… for story-hearing.

Phil.: If you are trying to win sympathy for your own story, be warned that I am losing patience.

Poet: You are right. I'll return to it forthwith.

In his own way, the philosopher was also arrogant. He was too self-assured to seek the advice of those with more imagination and too stubborn to hear it if it was offered. The result? He showed an absolutely uncanny knack for doing exactly the wrong thing, choosing the one action at each stage that would make things worse. Perhaps when he was younger, he was different. Maybe he wasn't so set in his ways, so adamant and persnickety. At the time of my story, however, he showed a decided lack of, shall we say, "inter-personal skills." Over time, these led to a series of social gaffes. Further blundering transformed those transgressions into minor crimes. And finally, with what can only be described as extraordinary forensic incompetence, he was able to elevate those minor crimes into a capital offense.

You seem to regard argument as a philosopher's stone for transmuting the lead of popular opinion into the gold of real knowledge, but all this philosopher's stone managed to do was turn *farce* into *tragedy*. Really, how do you get yourself executed for schmoozing in the *agora*? The gold that is needed is the golden mean between the extremes of misology, the disillusionment with argument, and what I suppose we could call logomania, an obsessive love of argument.

Phil.: Are you finished? Then my verdict would have to be a negative one because you have not told the story accurately. That is what comes of your cavalier disregard for the Truth. You have misportrayed the philosopher who, after all, was said to be fairly described as "the wisest and the justest and the best."

Poet: Are you challenging my story? Then I guess we do have an argument because that is how an argument begins.

Phil.: "Argument" is said in many ways. Didn't we agree on that? The argument that one person presents is different than the argument that engages two. Philosophical argumentation, as part of the solitary quest for truth, welcomes but does not need disputants.

Poet: Yes, that is so. Arguments do take many forms.

Phil.: Consider the second form of argument, the argument that two can have with each other. What is going on in such an exchange?

Poet: Do you mean what makes a dialogue an argument?

Phil.: What makes a dialogue dialectical?

Poet: What makes a dialogue *confrontational*?

Phil.: Are you confusing dialectical and confrontational?

Poet: Are we playing "Questions"? Then I ask: Can't we argue <u>with</u> one another rather than <u>against</u> one another?

Phil.: Then I ask: Have you forgotten that I argue to learn not to win?

Poet: No…

Phil.: Not a question. Point for me! (*Does a little victory dance.*) Why do you think I am interested only in winning?

Poet: Why do you think I am interested in winning at all?

Phil.: If truth is not the goal of argument, then what else is there but winning?

Poet: Can't there be an argument without winners and losers? Is there no point to a hunt without a kill?

Phil.: Didn't I just grant that point? But isn't this still all about the quarry and not the chase?

Poet: If the quarry escapes and does not fall prey, has there been no hunt?

Phil.: So isn't it the quarry that is necessary, not the kill? Isn't truth as a goal, therefore, the necessary and defining feature of argument… even if we never get there?

Poet: Can't we have a dialogue without your incessant questionning? Have you forgotten what happened to Socrates? Enough with questions!

Phil.: If you cannot keep your emotions in check, how can you possibly expect us to have reasoned debate?

Poet: How can you argue without emotion? And why should I want reasoned debate?

Phil.: How can I convince you, if not with reason?

Poet: Why not persuade me instead… with art?

Phil.: Now it is you who continues with the questions.

Poet: So… is that our answer, that neither emotional conflict nor rational disagreement, but questions themselves are the lifeblood of argument? Oh, that was a question… Sorry. But now I think I see where you were trying to lead me.

Phil.: Then I have succeeded this much, anyway: you have come to see that what I have to say is not as unacceptable as you previously thought, even if you do not accept it yourself. The goal's the thing.

Poet: And understanding is a fine goal. Agreement is not the only successful end to an argument. What about *acknowledgement*?

Phil.: So in the end, did I really only need to explain myself, rather than argue? Or, rather, was it that explanation was successful as an argument precisely because it was not an argument?

Poet: I will allow you those questions. But see what happened. You argued with my story. Doesn't that make my story an argument? Stories are aguments!

Phil.: Ah, now it is my turn to say that I think I see where <u>you</u> are heading with this. Our exchange on how to understand the life, and death, of our argumentative philosopher might actually constitute an argument. So I will grant you this: *A story may include, or be included in, or be used as an argument*. But that is not to say that stories themselves are arguments.

Poet: You are right. What I meant to say is the converse, not that stories are arguments, but that *arguments are stories*. They are just one of the kinds of stories that we tell. Thus, *arguers must be story-tellers*, and like all story-tellers, they need to engage their hearers--invite them along, *compel them in*, carry them away.

Phil.: I think you listen to yourself too much, and have let yourself get carried away by your own words!

Poet: A thousand pardons. But we agreed that stories can be arguments and that arguers are story-tellers. I can't resist pointing out that just a moment ago, when you were arguing against my story, you yourself were using a story to make your argument!

Phil.: How was I using a story? What are you talking about?

Poet: The description of the philosopher that you offered--"the wisest" and all the other trappings--is from a story--a different story than the one I told.

Phil.: No, it is from the same story, but a different version of it. A more accurate version I might add.

Poet: Why do you say that? Did my story get something wrong--the charges, the trial, the verdict, or the outcome? I thought you said that is the sort of thing that matters, and that all the rest is art, unnecessary and unwanted embellishment.

Phil.: But you have cast them in the wrong light. You presented Socrates' as inadvertently or mistakenly antagonizing his fellow citizens rather than doing so deliberately. You have misread his actions. This is what I meant by saying that the story-telling act is already partly an argument. I was merely challenging your premises.

Poet: Are you now saying that it is not only the actions that are important, but how they are told? I find that strategic retreat most congenial. How a story is understood depends in large measure on how it is told.

*Phil.***:** But only in large measure. How it is understood depends even more on how it is heard. Do not forget the story-hearer, my good story-teller!

Poet: How could I? Have *you* forgotten that I declared you the sole judge and jury of my story?

Phil.: Ten thousand pardons. I will grant you that arguers are story-tellers of a kind, so that one way to be a bad arguer is to be a bad story-teller. But I will also maintain that one way to be a bad story-teller is to be a bad arguer. And that is how, for all your story-telling art, you have been a bad story-teller. In particular, you have argued from false premises. Our exchange was not really about the story of Socrates, but about how best to understand that story. The interpretation--not the story itself--was the issue. We agree on what happened to Socrates, don't we?

Poet: Such naiveté is almost endearing in a philosopher, if it weren't so annoying! How you tell the story of the events--and even which events--already incorporates so much interpretation…

Phil.: Yes, yes, yes! But for someone to hear your story, to try to make sense of it in order to understand it, is itself an interpretive act, an argumentative act. Rather than think of arguers as story-tellers, think of *story-hearers* with their continual silent questionning as arguers. That, after all, is the same kind of critical engagement that lies at the heart of good, philosophical argumentation, not the adversarial sort of engagement that it is so easy to fall into -- and so easy for the epigones of Aristophanes to parody.

Poet: Well, I must admit that I do indeed often find myself wanting to interrupt a story to ask the story-teller a question, to demand explanation, to object to his picture of the world, or to tell him that his characters simply would not behave the way he has them behaving.

Phil.: Yes, exactly! And that is what I was doing when I listened to your story. I found

myself arguing with it -- even when I agreed! The internal argument was simply louder and more noticeable when I disagreed, such as when you misportrayed Socrates…

Poet: …when you heard--if not misheard!--me as misportraying Socrates.

Phil.: Let us not follow that red herring. The point is that if the audience, the story-hearers, are engaged in argument, then one thing that can make a story bad is that it is a bad argument! A story that simply cannot be believed cannot be saved, not even by the greatest art of the greatest story-teller.

Poet: Well, I will happily grant you this much: not even the greatest art of the greatest story-teller is a match for the greatest density of the worst story-listener. Not Homer, nor Orpheus, nor even Amphion himself (despite our legends) could entertain the rocks in the fields.

Phil.: And Socrates himself couldn't convince them of even the simplest proposition.

Poet: Alas, unworthy audiences are the plague of story-tellers the world over.

Phil.: I can do aught but sympathize, because unworthy disputants are the bane of philosophers everywhere.

Poet: Ah, but a worthy audience…

Phil.: … a worthy disputant…

Poet: …is a joy forever.

It comes to me now, to ask this question. We have distinguished the argument that one person presents from the argument that two people have with each other, but we have also spoken of arguments as stories and arguing as story-telling, which then makes an argument of three--two disputants and the audience.

Phil.: Yes…

Poet: And by stories and arguments you have convinced and persuaded me…

Phil.: Reason triumphant!

Poet: …that story-hearers are arguers engaging the story-tellers.

Phil.: Indeed.

Poet: But then who is their audience? Who is their judge?

Phil.: Yes, a question that must be asked. You are accountable to your audience--to me. Doesn't the story-hearer likewise have to be accountable? Surely an interpretation has to answer to something. The text of the story is determinate even if the meaning is not. I am accountable to Reason. It is a sign of strength to bow before good argument. I am pleased

to see you are now willing to go along. At long last, our disagreement has been ended.

Poet: You have misheard me. Indeed, you have not listened to us. Were we not commiserating together about our unworthy audiences? So haven't we set ourselves up as the judges of those who hear--and argue--with us? The story-teller is accountable to the story-hearers only because they are accountable to him! You may objectify, personify, or even deify Reason as much as you like, but in the end, we are alone. There is no Other.

Phil.: If you are correct, then, wouldn't it be possible for someone to tell the story of our argument, to make *a story of our argument*? And in that story, the winner of the argument would be determined not by what actually transpired, nor by the quality of our arguments, nor by the canons of Reason, but by the whim of the narrator? It is you who would make a god -- of the story-teller!

Poet: Quite possibly, but it would require an especially artful poet to make the weaker argument appear the stronger. I doubt any poet could do that--at least not without some training in philosophy!

Now if you are correct in what you have been arguing, then such a narration could be used as an argument in its own right. Arguments take many forms, and stories can be put to many purposes.

Phil.: But your claim that stories can be read in many ways means that the story might well be used as an argument for very different conclusions!

Poet: Just so… as you wanted to use my story about the argumentative philosopher for your own purposes.

Phil.: Your story about the argumentative philosopher? Shouldn't that be your argument about the story-telling philosopher? In the end, it was really Plato, not Socrates, who was the subject of our argument.

Poet: Ah, I see your point.

Phil.: And you will finally admit that we did have an argument this day?

Poet: Well, I will say that that is a very good way to tell the story of this morning's exchange.

Phil.: In the end, you now equivocate on the word "story." "Stories" can be said in many ways.

Poet: Yes, and they can be *told* in many ways, too.

Both, shaking hands: Agreed!