

**NOTES AND GLEANINGS /
NOTE E CURIOSITÀ**

**THE IDENTITY OF DISCORD:
THE PARADOXICAL DISCOURSE OF
SPERONE SPERONI'S
*DIALOGO DELLA DISCORDIA***

Robert Buranello

Sommario

L'umanista padovano Sperone Speroni (1500-1588) scrisse il Dialogo della discordia tra il 1537 e il 1540 e lo incluse nella sua prima edizione dei Dialoghi, pubblicata a Venezia nel 1542 da Paolo Manuzio. In quest'opera Speroni critica la natura stessa della ricerca epistemologica e fenomenologica. Come si dimostra in questo saggio, il Dialogo della discordia è caratterizzato fondamentalmente dal dubbio e dall'ambiguità dal momento che si propone la difesa dell'impossibile. L'interlocutore principale, che si presenta come la dea Discordia, indebolisce il proprio caso a causa del suo temperamento che distorce e mina l'uso degli strumenti retorici a sua disposizione. La sua tesi pertanto è destinata a fallire fin dall'inizio per l'inclusione di elementi contrastanti e contraddittori.

Paradoxical works heap praise on subjects that are typically considered unpraiseworthy in order to raise questions and unsettle what is commonly considered true. The paradox exploits the fact of relative, or competing value systems. By its very nature, it is always involved in dialectic. By challenging some orthodoxy, “the paradox is an oblique criticism of absolute judgment or absolute convention.” The subject at the very basis of rhetorical paradoxes is officially disapproved in received opinion. Opinion, received or otherwise, is the dialectical opposite of truth. As Rosalie L. Cole tells us, what is fundamentally paradoxical about literary paradoxes is that by undermining their own points of view, “they are often designed to assert some fundamental and absolute truth.” In essence, paradoxical works are examples of *serio ludere*. The most famous classical examples of this form of literature are the dialogues of Lucian.

The Paduan scholar Sperone Speroni (1500-1588) wrote only two paradoxical dialogues, the *Dialogo della discordia* and the *Dialogo dell'usura*. Composed between 1537 and 1540, these works appeared in the first edition of his *Dialoghi* which were published in Venice in 1542 by Paolo Manuzio. These two dialogues are set in undetermined locales where the interactions between gods and men are characterized by doubt and ambiguity. Like Lucian, Speroni is, at times, intellectually eclectic. He also expresses a certain amount of skepticism regarding humanity and its constant attempts to delve deeply into truth that always remains out of reach. However, unlike the classical dialogist, Speroni's iconoclasm and subversive nature are not indicative of a wholesale disregard of any particular philosophical school.

Speroni's paradoxical dialogues are examples of literary experimentation. He refers to them as "puro esercizio" and "giovanili capricci" in the style of Lucian. These two Lucianic works allowed him the freedom to go beyond the spatio-temporal confines of other dialogic models by offering him an arsenal of *topoi* and motifs that, of themselves, push the limits of the genre. The stock elements like otherworldly characters, mock praise, ambiguity and masking, and particularly the *katabase* and *anodos* that blur the boundaries between the realms of gods and men and free the discourse from normal secular restraints are used quite effectively by Speroni. He drew on these elements of the paradoxical dialogue in order to critique the very nature of epistemological and phenomenological investigations.

The *Dialogo della discordia* records a conversation that takes place exclusively between the gods Discord, Jove and Mercury. In this dialogue humans are certainly important; however, they do not appear on the scene with the gods. This dialogue, like *Dialogo dell'usura*, takes place in an environment that remains essentially undetermined. The dialogue on discord is carried out between the gods on Mt. Olympus, where, for example, there are references to the clouds. Nonetheless, there is a certain amount of flexible spatio-temporal shifting. The *Dialogo della discordia* utilizes this flexibility to great effect when Discord presents her arguments regarding the unfair treatment received at the hands of both the gods and mortals.

The somewhat abrupt opening of *Dialogo della discordia* is typical of paradoxical dialogues that are generally characterized by a certain *brio* and quick wit. Here, when Discord rebukes Jove for disrespectfully allowing her name to be taken in vain by mortals, she overturns the *sensus communis* regarding

theogony. She claims that both the heavens and earth were brought into existence by her (*Opere*, I: 133).

Basically, the discourse of Discord revolves around the prospect of asserting the positive elements of her being that have been consistently denied. Discord never challenges the traditionally negative aspects attributed to her; she merely wants the other side of her to be recognized too (*Opere*, I: 143).

In order to be whole, both parts of her dual nature must be acknowledged. However, she also recognizes that her duality is the result of the variety of discordant things that she herself brought into being. Here lies an important and fundamental irony in her claim: the goddess Discord who, as the originating principle of all things in heaven and earth, caused everything to come into being and therefore ensured that all things would be seen in terms of thesis and antithesis, attempts to engage Jove in a dialectical confrontation in order to reintegrate the neglected aspect of her being. However, Jove is indifferent to her plight. He is more worried about being seen with her, due to the commonly accepted negative connotations associated with her. In order to ensure that Jove will listen to her pleas concerning her positive side, she threatens to cause him even more trouble. This strengthens the stereotype that she is trying to undo.

The ludic potential of this situation is maximized by having Jove, the ungrateful great-grandson of Discord who is afraid to be seen in the company of the universally maligned goddess, express fear that the mortals will begin to associate the two of them, and consequently neglect to make offerings to him. He is not immune to the importance attached to reputation, for he reminds Discord that humans are “ancora possenti di lodarne e vituperarne, come tu sai.” This passage points to the importance the gods assign to praise for their very existence. In

practical human terms, he is referring to epideictic rhetoric. This form of rhetoric, designed to heap praise or blame on the subject matter chosen, is more malleable and ambiguous than either deliberative or forensic rhetoric. According to Aristotle, the deliberative cause is used to either exhort or dissuade a course of action and looks toward the future. Forensic rhetoric is utilized in the argumentation of a legal case to determine the guilt or innocence of a person accused of a crime and is therefore based on the interpretation of past actions. Epideictic rhetoric is concerned with honour or disgrace and is therefore concerned with the present. Since epideictic rhetoric neither incites towards or against a particular action, nor proves or disproves innocence, but merely concerns itself with reputation, it deals with the present moment. It is also much more affected by the artifice of the orator who may manipulate his *amplificatio* in such a way as to convince his listeners that he is telling the truth, even though he may not be. In the *trattatello, Del genere dimostrativo*, Speroni explains how the “amplificazione bugiarda” is particularly applicable to epideictic rhetoric:

[...] di questa tale amplificazione non è sforzato a trattare il dimostrativo, e può, come a lui piace, *a dritto ed a torto amplificare, sol che persuada e faccia credere altrui che egli dica la verità.* (*Opere*, V: 548) [my emphasis]

In the same *trattatello*, Speroni explains the compatibility of epideictic rhetoric with paradoxical works. The fundamental artfulness of these works allows one to adapt or manipulate praise or blame so as to argue difficult issues:

[...] è facile cosa lodar gli uomini all'uomo, ma lodar le altre cose in quanto sono utili e benefiche al mondo, vol qualche studio, almen per far saper l'utilità che ci possa recar una cosa non

comunemente nota alle persone. Dunque sarà più difficil cosa lodar Busiri, Elena, la mosca, la quartana, la usura, la discordia che lodar gli uomini boni, e le cose di manifesta utilità. (*Opere*, V: 550)

Whereas Discord remains assertive in her insistence on the positive and productive aspects of her nature, the other side of Jove's nature is revealed through his surprisingly subservient attitude toward mortals. Fear and intimidation lead him to adopt a policy of inaction. Therefore, Jove lays bare his fear which proves that, despite being the recognized ruler of the gods, he is also ruled. In a passage that clearly underlines Speroni's subversive intention and draws attention to the blurred demarcation line between the realms of gods and men, Jove lets Discord in on a secret that explains his trepidation. Men, he declares, have the ability to "transumanarsi e farsi cose divine." The existence, or relevance of the gods is dependent on human praise. He tells Discord, "tu sai bene che non io, ma essi n'hanno le chiavi" (*Opere*, I: 134-5).

Discord attempts to convince Jove to listen to her by suggesting that he place a cloud in front of her to obscure the mortals' view. He claims he cannot do this because the clouds only listen to Juno, "quel dimonio di [sua] mogliera" (*Opere*, I: 135). Seeing that Jove is unable and unwilling to listen to her, Discord threatens to descend to earth and reveal his secret. This sets off an angry exchange between the deities that not only highlights the negative aspect of Discord's nature, but also indicates that her talent for manipulating words and wreaking havoc is equal on both planes. She declares threateningly, "così scesa che io sarò in terra, anderò divulgando il secreto" (*Opere*, I: 135).

The theme of concealing and revealing is further strengthened by the way in which the gods arrive at a solution to the problem. When Discord finds out that none of Juno's clothes are around for her to wear in order to disguise her identity, she suggests that Jove give her some of Ganymede's clothing. She says, "Dunque dammi alcuna delle sue robe, e fammi maschera come tu vuoi, sol che m'ascolti" (*Opere*, I: 135) [my emphasis]. After her request for a cloud to obscure her from view went ungranted, Discord accepts the clothing of Ganymede just so that she may be heard. Of all the possible mythological references, the choice of Ganymede is quite intriguing. According to the myth, Jove was so enamoured of this mortal boy that he transformed himself into an eagle in order to kidnap him from earth and bring him to Olympus. The transformation of the ruler of the gods into a lower-order being in order to descend to earth so that he might kidnap a human boy and bring him to the realm of the gods is an example of a deceptive reversal of hierarchy. Furthermore, in this story that is tinged with transgression on many levels, the supposedly peaceful coexistence between gods and men is revealed to be discordant. The illicit relationship between Jove and Ganymede caused a great deal of friction with Juno and the other gods of Olympus. Ultimately, the choice of Ganymede as the disguise for Discord has important implications. In order for Discord to reveal herself, it is not enough that she hide herself from view behind a cloud. Similarly, it is not enough that she disguise herself as the goddess Juno. Not only must she assume the identity of a mortal, she must also cross-dress! In other words, every vestige of her real identity, from her immortality to her gender, must be concealed in order for her to assert her true and unitary nature. This strongly ironic situation

underscores Discord's ambiguity. In fact, ambiguity and disguise lie at the basis of her whole discourse.

With the words, "senza essere altramente artificiosa ed ornata, assai ti persuaderà l'orazion mia a dolerti di me" (*Opere*, I: 137), Discord claims to speak clearly and without artifice. However, Jove cannot overcome the incongruence between her outward appearance and her claim at sincerity. To him, it is a constantly upsetting factor. At first, he begins to laugh and says, "l'abito in che io ti vedo al presente, al quale non risponde troppo bene il tuo volto, mi mosse a riso." However, moments after the initial shock, Jove realizes the appropriateness of Discord's outward appearance. He declares, "abito tanto discorde dalla persona [...] non dovrebbe esser d'altrui, che della Discordia medesima" (*Opere*, I: 139) [my emphasis].

Since Discord is a goddess who incites disagreement among gods and men, it is only fitting that she appear as a beautiful young boy with whom Jove fell in love to the dismay of his wife and peers. In this dialogue Speroni grants Discord an attractive outward appearance that is, nevertheless, basically misleading. By having a cross-dressed Discord declare that her oration will be neither "artificiosa" nor "ornata," Speroni's tongue is planted firmly in his cheek for he is conjuring the classical liar paradox, the perfect self-contradiction. The flexible and ambiguous confines of the paradoxical dialogue allow Speroni to mix terrestrial and immortal elements and flaunt the rules of decorum that are applicable in other forms of dialogue. Furthermore, this allows him to satyriize various aspects of life, both spiritual and secular.

When Discord begins to plead her case with Jove, she claims to do so in a strictly philosophical manner. She does this because she sees the writings of speculative philosophers as the

primary source of all the disagreement regarding her nature. These philosophers claim that there are two Discords: one that is good and the other bad. She is outraged by their presumptuousness and declares, “La qual cosa come è fuori d’ogni ragione, così è contraria all’esperienza.” On the level of experience, she claims that in her vast travels, she has never encountered any other Discord.

On the other hand, these philosophers, “una certa maniera di gente oziosa e da poco” practice their “sciocca e presuntuosa professione” while completely removed from the world. Yet, they are heralded as speakers of the truth. In contrast with her direct experience between both worlds, these mortals rely on their imagination for their conclusions (*Opere*, I: 142).

This assertion again points directly to the different confines of men and gods that come together in the paradoxical dialogue. Despite the fact that Discord is a goddess with access to the spatio-temporal dimensions of both worlds, her reputation is determined by the excogitations of finite men who, despite leading solitary and contemplative lives, manage to convince the unlearned “vulgo” (and even Jove himself!) of their explanation of the nature of the immortal gods. In essence, finite and limited humans are depicted as having more power than the gods for, although they cannot actually pass from one realm to the other, they are able to influence both worlds from their fixed position by the strength of their imagination. By means of works of the imagination, like literature, humans are able to transcend their boundaries. Therefore, according to the terms described by Discord, humans can indeed act like the gods. Although she is trying to lay blame squarely on their shoulders, she is actually fortifying Jove’s earlier claim that humans have the “potere di

transumanarsi.” By doing this, Speroni ensures that her discourse remains contradictory.

First, Discord maligns the philosophers and deprives them of their human status by equating them with “bestie” and “peggio che bestie” who lead a life similar to “quella d’un legno” (*Opere*, I: 143). This act of dehumanization increases the vertical distance between humans and the inhabitants of Olympus. Discord then lays out the philosophers’ fallacious conclusions that she will dispute in philosophical terms, thus changing the direction from vertical to horizontal. As a reflection of the confusion that this change in her discourse has caused, the elevation of her discourse from a visceral *vituperatio* against the philosophers to a logical philosophical argumentation of their flawed and defective reasoning causes an undesired effect on her audience. Jove, who earlier expressed his predilection for epideictic rhetoric, falls asleep. He falls asleep because Discord’s oration has become too long-winded and boring. After this episode, Discord realizes that her straying has alienated her audience. As a result, she changes her tactics yet again. From the *reprehensio* of her adversaries, to the philosophical *refutatio* of their arguments, she passes to the maieutic method of the Socratic dialogue.

Discordia: Ecco Giove, acciocché da qui innanzi tu sia più attento alle mie parole, e men t’incresca l’udire, non parlerò continuamente dal principio alla fine tutta l’intenzion mia, ma di parte in parte ti dimanderò e tu mi risponderai.

Giove: Son contento, ma parla e chiedi con brevi parole. (*Opere*, I: 146)

By abandoning the oratorical exposition of her argument in favour of the Socratic method, the philosophical investigations

are carried out by means of question and answer that continue the comparisons between the celestial and terrestrial worlds. Discord's questions go back and forth in time and up and down between heaven and earth, contrasting various elements with their opposites. Although the fundamental difference between the celestial realm and the terrestrial one (characterized as "là giù a basso, ove niuna cosa non è se non variabile e corruttibile, in continuo travaglio, senza pace e senza riposo" [*Opere*, I: 151]) is undeniable, the discrepancy between them is also accepted as a result of nature's will. Hence, following the goddess's argument, Discord is one and the same; it is only the context in which she operates that changes. This is what causes the confusion in men's minds regarding the supposed duality of her being. After further analogies with the natural world and the comparison between the soul and body of man that still fail to convince him entirely, Jove suggests that Discord speak directly with the philosophers and present her arguments to them.

Rather than allow Discord to descend to earth, Jove recommends that Mercury be sent to present the Goddess's side and report to him the philosophers' response. That Discord would cause even more unrest and worsen the situation is understood by her vengeful request to send lightning bolts instead of the messenger.

In contrast with Jove who lazily and unwillingly considers his actions, Discord is depicted as quick-tempered and easily provoked into descending to earth to cause trouble. The ease with which she shifts between worlds is indicative of her nature and reflects her eclectic method of argumentation which vacillates between opposites. Constructive and destructive, philosophical and rhetorical, Discord always represents contradiction

When he first appears on the scene, Mercury is a little disoriented by the sight of Discord's appearance. In yet another reference to the attempt to disregard external superficialities, Discord says to Mercury, "Deh, non attendere all'abito che io porto, il quale mi posso torre quando mi piace, ma più tosto pon mente al dolore che io ho nell'animo." By again intimating Discord's ability to simulate and dissimulate at will, Speroni is alluding to the nature of her discourse. It is important to note that Mercury does not require a reiteration of Discord's lamentations. He is already aware of her story because many times "[.] ha dato grata e benigna audienza" (*Opere*, I: 160). As messenger of the gods and intermediary between the celestial and terrestrial realms, Mercury is a polysemic deity who also represents contrasting qualities. While he is referred to in terms of eloquence, mediation, and culture, he is also the god of shopkeepers and thieves, and is recognized in both the christian and pagan worlds. Consequently, his nature is quite compatible with that of Discord.

When Mercury rehearses before Discord the oration he plans to deliver to the philosophers, Jove appears suspicious that there has been some collusion between the two deities. Jove objects to Mercury's desire to add "alcun'altra giunta," to the oration. He declares, "Mercurio figliuolo, basta aver riferito le sue ragioni, senza che ve ne aggiunga dell'altre, che ingiurare chi non t'offende, non è giusta cosa." These objections anger Discord whose sole concern is "giustizia in ogni modo" (*Opere*, I: 162). Jove's claims to harbouring doubts causes the goddess to react again, as she claims to have proven that discord is a good and natural thing and furthermore that there is in fact only one Discord, not many. While not disputing this, Jove declares that she did not do so in the order she declared she would follow.

The disorderly nature of her discourse undermines her case because an errant *dispositio* is seen by Jove as indicating a potentially errant method of reasoning.

Giove: Bene hai provato quelle due cose, ma non in quel modo che tu dicesti di voler fare, cioè l'una prima, e l'altra da poi, ma ambidue insieme senza distinguere l'una dall'altra. Per la qual cosa *le tue confuse ragioni m'hanno messo nel capo un certo non so che, incognito, indistinto*, che io non me ne so sviluppare.

Discordia: Questo non fa nulla.

Giove: Anzi fa assai, perocché *l'ordine e la disposizione delle cose variata in diverse maniere, fa parere quel che non è. E che ciò sia vero, poniamo che la terra fossi qui suso, e la giù a basso la luna, credi tu che in questa cotal disposizione il mondo si conservasse?* (*Opere*, I: 163) [my emphasis]

In the end, Discord's attempt at haphazardly mixing rhetoric and philosophy leads to her undoing. Her flagrant disregard of any semblance of ordered argumentation (despite her claims to present one) in favour of an attack on her detractors and casually arranged presentation of her case leads Jove to doubt the validity of her argument. In truth, Jove is a difficult and unwilling listener. In order to captivate and convince him, Discord changes the form of her appeal three times. Immediately after discussing the origin of the cosmos, she launches into a *vituperatio* against the speculative philosophers whom she blames for her unhappy state. Charged with strong accusations and negative descriptions, this speech manages to hold his attention. However, because she is dealing with philosophers, she then attempts to challenge their arguments in philosophical terms. This proves to be too boring for the disinterested Jove

who falls asleep. Consequently, Discord decides to use the form of the Socratic questioning in order to involve Jove more directly in the discovery of the truth she propounds.

Although Jove remains engaged in the Socratic process, by the end of the dialogue the many twists and turns that the goddess of disagreement has taken leaves him in doubt. A sound and well-ordered philosophical presentation of her points following the logical path initially proposed by Discord would have convinced him, but the tortuous route ultimately embarked on does not. Her mixture of sacred and profane, celestial and terrestrial, with rhetorical flourishes disguised as philosophical argumentation, makes Jove question the degree of substantial proof in Discord's case. Basically, he is left in doubt as to whether the goddess is concentrating more on form (*res*) than on content (*verba*). Her distracting and deceiving appearance, in conflict with her claims to truth, coupled with Mercury's attempt to further embellish her case, justifies Jove's doubt. The discourse of Discord, with its constant shifting and concentration on appearance, seems more like what Speroni refers to as "rettorica sofistica." In his *trattatello In difesa dei sofisti*, Speroni explains that the basic artificiality of the Sophist's rhetoric "non move alla misericordia" because it is incapable of expressing the truth. In Speroni's words, the Sophist is "lo imitatore, il quale non è niente, e somiglia ogni cosa." When, in *Apologia* III, the author declares that "la facoltà del sofista è la scienza, ma imperfetta" (*Opere*, I: 385), Speroni asserts the essentially sophistical nature of rhetoric that presents the true-seeming but does not arrive at the truth. This points to the essentially unbridgeable gap between the celestial and the terrestrial. The celestial is eternal and therefore truly is; the terrestrial is transient and only appears to be. Concentration on the present moment as a means to

penetrating eternal truths is erroneous. However, this is the inevitable course taken by all human endeavours. In another passage from the short treatise on the sophists, Speroni clarifies this point by drawing a parallel between the transitory and elusive nature of our lives and sophistical rhetoric. He maintains,

Sofista è lo esser nostro, perché non è, e pare essere. Non è perché il presente dello essere è instante indivisibile, che fu piuttosto, e forse non sarà, che non è; e solo lo immortale è veramente. (*Opere*, V: 432)

In brief, Discord's attempt to convince Jove by drawing freely from elements of the vastly differing eternal celestial realm and the temporal terrestrial one ends in an inconclusive collection of discordant elements that undermines the very point that she proposed to prove. In *Dialogo della discordia*, Speroni takes full advantage of the flexible spatio-temporal confines of the paradoxical dialogue to argue the point that a loosely organized and eclectic method of argumentation that borrows indiscriminately and does not fortify the *res* with *verba* is tantamount to sophistry. Therefore, although it may appear attractive, it is essentially insubstantial and insufficient.

The setting of paradoxical dialogues lends itself to a relatively uninhibited blending of intellectual discourses and linguistic registers that confers on the dialogue an unsettled quality. Consequently, the concept of decorum, dependent on setting, is also unsettled. This allows Speroni to adopt an ironic stance regarding the nature of human philosophical investigations based on fixed and rigid systems because paradoxical works champion doubt and relativity. Speroni's *encomium* of discord is paradoxical in that its very existence is in the shadow of doubt. The *Dialogo della discordia* is fundamentally characterized by

doubt and ambiguity since it proposes to defend the indefensible. It is therefore doomed to failure from the outset. Its fate is sealed by the inclusion of contrasting and contradictory elements that contaminate the discourse to such a degree that it is reduced to an argumentation of pure sophistry.

(University of Cape Town)