

Introduction

According to Alfred North Whitehead, Western philosophy was no more than a series of footnotes to Plato. This essay – and it is but an essay – is about a few of those footnotes. It is about two players and their game; about Erasmus and Huizinga, or more specifically, about *In Praise of Folly* and *Homo Ludens*, and what these books can still tell us in fundamentalist times.

But let us first turn to Plato. He seems a bundle of contradictions: a writer who distrusted words, a thinker who wrote dialogues, an artist who wanted to banish poets. According to Plato, mathematics was a blueprint for reality; it formed the cornerstone of an idealism that distinguished between appearance and reality, between the confusion of reality and the essence of existence, between that which was bound to a time and place and that which was eternal.

His great opponents maintained that ‘ideas’ or essences did not exist. They were known as sophists, masters of rhetoric, of the spoken word. If there were such a thing as truth, they maintained, it emerged in the clash of opinions, in the consensus between interlocutors. This truth was thus *always* bound to a time and a place. Protagoras believed that man, not mathematics, was the measure of all things, and that arguments could be advanced in favour of or against *anything*.

That fight, in the fifth century BC, can be seen as the first battle in a perpetual conflict. The opposing positions then were taken by rhetoric and philosophy, but it has always been about the same thing: two recurrent attitudes to life, ways of thinking, mind-sets, whatever one wishes to call it. The conviction that there are two (or more) sides to everything versus the certainty that there is but one side; relativism versus essentialism; play versus seriousness.

This conflict seems to have entered a crucial phase. Pessimists claim that it was won long ago by seriousness. Seriousness has two

accomplices, one old and one new. The old one is religion. Whatever form it takes, myth or monotheism, it is an all-explaining system, the answer to our existential doubt. The new one is science; a system that is at least as fascinating, a Marxism for advanced students, whereby everything that was Spirit has become Matter. It is one Truth against the other.

Literature, meanwhile, is a very different proposition. By telling stories, we narrate ourselves. Literature is the thread that we draw out of ourselves, with which we weave our reality. It is religion in the sense that it gives meaning, it is science in the sense that it describes. But it is not truth. Rather, literature is the opposite: it is ambiguity itself. If it is truth, then it is the only truth that is 'untrue'.

It is this contradiction that we explore in this short book. We first consider Erasmus, a true rhetorician, who enlisted the aid of the philosopher Plato at a crucial moment. Did he thereby find Truth, or did he remain faithful to the relativism of rhetoric? This question is one to which Huizinga gives an answer. Huizinga, however, was also a rhetorician (or what I shall call a writer) who needed Plato; and Plato subsequently proves somewhat more rhetorical than he professed to be (for he was a true writer). We then turn to writing itself, or rather, writing and reading as a form of dialogue, of groping in the darkness, of playing prisoner's base. It is 'Ein weites Feld,' to quote Grass, who was in turn quoting Fontane; but then, what is an essayist but a child in seven-league boots?