

THE *PROPHASIS* OF DESERTION

οἱ μὲν ἐπ' αὐτομολίας προφάσει ἀπέρχονται, οἱ δὲ ὡς ἕκαστοι δύνανται (πολλή δ' ἡ Σικελία)
Thuc. 7.13.2

This statement, in Nicias' letter from Sicily, has puzzled readers and editors,¹ and it has baffled translators, who expect phrases with ἐπὶ προφάσει to indicate a pretext or ostensible reason for an action. In my first discussion of *prophasis* I suggested that 'what Nicias means is that they are leaving without offering any other reason or pretext' (except αὐτομολία),² and Dover, in the *Historical Commentary*, goes halfway towards accepting this interpretation ('though it is obscure, I do not think it is impossible'); but it does not satisfy me now, and it is firmly rejected by Hunter Rawlings.³ A different approach to the question is needed.

Nicias is not concerned with any excuses or pretexts that these deserters are offering. He is explaining the 'true *prophasis*' of this epidemic of desertion, and does so in terms of opportunity – they can find employment in the enemy's forces and there are numerous opportunities elsewhere (Sicily is a large island). Translators may not want to render ἐπ' αὐτομολίας προφάσει as 'taking the opportunity to desert to the enemy', arguing that '*prophasis* cannot mean opportunity'. But a *prophasis* is an explanation, true or false, that can be given for an action,⁴ and the best explanation (or excuse) can often be found in the circumstances – the opportunity that tempts or encourages. These deserters have a *prophasis*.

This is not the only passage in Thucydides where 'opportunity' seems to be the word that translators need. A good example is in 4.126.5, where Brasidas is explaining how barbarian armies fight: αὐτοκράτωρ δὲ μάχῃ μάλιστ' ἂν καὶ πρόφασιν τοῦ σώζεσθαι τινι πρεπόντως πορίσειε. He means that their style of fighting as individuals, not as part of a strictly disciplined team like Greek hoplites, gives each man the opportunity to protect himself without incurring disgrace (though a Greek hoplite who thought only of himself would be disgraced). The Budé translation is grammatically accurate: 'Un combat sans direction d'ensemble est particulièrement propre à fournir des prétextes pour se mettre à l'abri honorablement'. But this is illogical language. No one needs any pretext or excuse for honourable action.⁵

We draw a fine line between 'pretext' and 'opportunity', but by using πρόφασιν a Greek speaker can avoid making the distinction. Lysias provides two examples of this. Speaking in his own person (12.6) he reports what Theognis and Peison had been saying among the Thirty, ὡς εἶέν τινες τῇ πολιτείᾳ ἀχθόμενοι· καλλίστην οὖν εἶναι πρόφασιν τιμωρεῖσθαι μὲν δοκεῖν, τῷ δ' ἔργῳ χρηματίζεσθαι. And his client, the cripple, thanks his accusers for giving him a πρόφασιν to tell the story of his life (24.1).

¹ Cf. Dover's note in the *Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (with references to earlier literature) and Bodin–de Romilly (Budé ed.), *Thucydide, Livres VI et VII*, Notes complémentaires, 167.

² *TAPA* 83 (1952), 215. For the later discussion see *TAPA* 103 (1972), 381–94. Both articles are reprinted in my *Selected Papers*, edd. Lateiner–Stephens (Chico, California, 1983). Cf. also Chr. Schäublin, *MH* 28 (1971), 133–44.

³ 'Giving desertion as a pretext: Thuc. 7.13.2', *CPh* 73 (1978), 134–6. Rawlings follows Grote in believing that Nicias is thinking of the 'explanation' that men might have to give when they reached a city in Sicily. He does not explain how readers of the letter could arrive at this interpretation of Nicias' words.

⁴ I maintained in *TAPA* 103 (1972), 382–3 that πρόφασιν regularly means ὅ τι ἂν τις προφαίνει (or προφαίνειν), 'what one says (or might say) in explanation of one's actions'.

⁵ Crawley, followed by Rex Warner, solves the difficulty by omitting πρεπόντως: 'Their independent mode of fighting never leaves anyone who wants to run away without a fair excuse for so doing'. This is not exactly what Brasidas means.

If he were speaking in English, 'opportunity' would be the tactful word to use. We might understand Nicias more easily if he had said that Sicily provided his men with a *prophasis* to desert.

There are passages in the historians and orators which describe how festivals sometimes provided opportunities or 'cover' for lawless or violent behaviour, and sometimes the word *πρόφασις* is used in these descriptions. Demosthenes (24.26) says that Timocrates took advantage of the Panathenaic festival, when the Boule was not in session, to organise an irregular piece of legislation, ἐπὶ τῇ τῶν Παναθηναίων προφάσει. He also recalls how Charicles seized the opportunity of a festive procession to assault his hated enemy with a whip, thinking that this act of *hybris* would be dismissed as permissible drunken rowdiness, τὴν ἐπὶ τῆς πομπῆς καὶ τοῦ μεθύειν προφασιν λαβών (21.80).

An attempt at a political *coup* usually needs a *prophasis* of this kind if it is to have any chance of succeeding. One may equally well call it 'cover', 'pretext', or 'opportunity'.

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PLATO, *PHAEDRUS* 263b6

Οὐκοῦν τὸν μέλλοντα τέχνην ῥητορικὴν μετιέναι πρῶτον μὲν δεῖ ταῦτα ὁδῶ διηρησθαι, καὶ εἰληφέναι τινὰ χαρακτῆρα ἑκατέρου τοῦ εἶδους, ἐν ᾧ τε ἀνάγκη τὸ πλήθος πλανᾶσθαι καὶ ἐν ᾧ μή (*Phaedrus* 263b6–9).¹ To the best of my knowledge the soundness of the first six words of this sentence (Οὐκοῦν . . . μετιέναι) has never been questioned, yet to accept them as they are in the manuscripts means to close one's eyes to the direction of the argument.

At 260d5–9 rhetoric personified and allowed to plead its case makes the 'big' statement that anyone learning how to speak would do well to know the truth about his subject but that even if he knows it he would not be able *ἄνευ ἐμοῦ*, i.e. without the aid of rhetoric, *πειθεῖν τέχνην*. From that point on the issues are whether rhetoric justly claims to be a *τέχνη*, what territory it covers and how the procedure of someone practising it *τέχνη* may differ from that of one for whom it is an *ἄτεχνος τριβή* (see 260e3–5). Even if rhetoric engages in *ἀπάτη* (261a6ff.) and proves e.g. one and the same thing to be both just and unjust (261c5ff., d3f.), success will be with *ὁ τέχνη τοῦτο δρῶν* (c10); witness Zeno of Elea, a master in such arguments *λέγοντα τέχνη* when he makes the same things appear like and unlike or one and many (261d6–9). To judge shrewdly what kind of subjects deceive people more easily (261eff.) the rhetorician himself must have a firm grasp of the truth: *λόγων ἄρα τέχνην, ᾧ ἐταίρε, ὁ τὴν ἀλήθειαν μὴ εἰδώς, δόξας δὲ τεθηρευκώς, γελοῖαν τινά, ὡς ἔοικε, καὶ ἄτεχνον παρέξεσται* (262c1ff.). Focusing on the difference between *ἄτεχνον* and *ἐντεχνον*, Socrates and Phaedrus now begin to examine the speech of Lysias and the two delivered by Socrates himself on the subject of *ἔρως*. In Lysias' speech the very first sentences present a shocking *ἄτεχνον* (262e5f.): he fails to define *ἔρως*, although this subject is clearly one of those on which people are *εὐπαπατητότεροι* (263b3). By

¹ R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge, 1952) renders *ἑκατέρου τοῦ εἶδους* by 'the two kinds of words'. At 263a6ff. Socrates does come forward with a distinction between *ὀνόματα* that mean the same to everybody and others of more controversial meaning. However, considering the reference to *διανοεῖσθαι* at a7 and the application made to *ἔρως* at c7, I prefer to understand 'two kinds of things' or 'of subjects'. Against the introduction of *ὀνομάτων* by conjecture at a2 (instead of *τοιούτων*) W. J. Verdenius has rightly protested (*Mnemosyne* ser. 4, 8 [1955], 243).