Nathaniel DEKEN [*]

Thucydides' Pericles, Coleridge's Mariner: on meaning in democracies

Abstract: Pericles' Funeral Oration is a testimony to the justice inherent in democratic systems. However, we are told by Thucydides that not long after the Oration the Athenians blame the downfall of the city on Pericles and consider sentencing him to death. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* on its surface, presents a narrative of tradition and superstition. But is Coleridge's message obscured by the discordance of the poem's varying perspectives? The present paper draws on the similarity between the *anomie* which Athens descended in to and the confusion Coleridge creates through the varying perspectives of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. If we situate Coleridge's *Mariner* within the context of the author's frustration surrounding the French Revolution, this similarity appears much less coincidental. From Thucydides onward, then, we have reason to believe that democracies exhibit a tension between common-striving and *anomie*. Processes of meaning-making take on utmost importance. The literary figures of Thucydides' Pericles and Coleridge's Mariner offer us two symbols of the precariousness of democracy. How and what we choose to make of these symbols is up to us; this paper offers the possibility that the albatross around our neck may be our inability to understand our fellow citizens.

Keywords: democracy, Thucydides, Coleridge, meaning-making, *anomie*

> But after he had turned them into "admirable and good" people, near the end of his life, they voted to convict Pericles of embezzlement and came close to condemning him to death.
>
> – *Gorgias*, 516a

> 'God save thee, ancient Mariner!
> From the fiends, that plague thee thus!—
> Why look'st thou so?'—With my cross-bow
> I shot the ALBATROSS.
>
> – *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (text of 1834)

Introduction

In the opening pages of the *Republic* (Plato 1992), an account is given of an exchange between an Athenian and a Seriphian concerning the *polis* and the citizen. When the Seriphian criticizes the Athenian on the grounds that his high reputation is due solely to the fact that he is from

[*] Phd Candidate., UC – Irvine, Political Science department; email: ndeken@uci.edu

Athens, The Athenian is said to have responded to the critic by telling him that "had he been a Seriphian, he wouldn't be famous, but neither would the [critic] even if he had been an Athenian" (330a). This passage would seem to indicate that the character of Athenian democracy was dependent upon the character of the Athenians themselves. That this sentiment is attributed to Themistocles is, of course, not accidental.

In the following paper I'll expand on this idea and contend that an essential feature of democracies is their capacity to shape meaning. Problematically, this capacity extends to the term 'democracy' itself. This fact cautions against hastily made conclusions and suggests that meaning-making is instead likely an iterative process. As examples of this process, I will lean heavily on the figures of Thucydides' Pericles and Coleridge's Mariner.

What these two figures share is a dependence upon others to derive meaning: Pericles' prominence as an Athenian statesman becomes meaningless amidst the plague, and the Mariner, isolated, is rendered an incoherent figure. If we situate Samuel Taylor Coleridge's creation of the *Mariner* within the context of his frustration surrounding the French Revolution, similarities between his poem and the fate of Pericles appear much less coincidental.

In book III of the *Politics*, Aristotle (Aristotle 2001) contends that "oligarchy has in view the interest of the wealthy; democracy of the needy: none of them the common good of all" (1279b). Yet he concedes that the multitude should be in power "seems to contain an element of truth" (1281a). Noting the dangers he sees in both allowing the *dēmos* to rule and also preventing it from having a share of power, he concludes: "The only way of escape is to assign to them some deliberative and judicial functions" (1281b). These functions are apropos the wisdom of crowds. Aristotle acknowledges this principle, noting that "if the people are not utterly degraded, although individually they may be worse judges than those who have special knowledge – as a body they are as good or better" (1282a). However, this acknowledgement is conditional, and the antecedent may give us pause if we consider "that virtue must be the care of a state which is truly so called, and not merely enjoys the name" (1280b).

Democracy confers an equality of condition which extends from its first citizen (embodied by Pericles) to its most obscured (fictionalized in the Ancient Mariner). This equality of condition, in theory, entails an equality of opportunity. How this equality obtains is context specific: the citizens of Athens were free to call for the death of Pericles; the Mariner, we are led to believe, was given license over his bow; each citizen of our (ostensible) democracy is free to draw meaning from these (or any other works) as they see fit.

This democratic equality of meaning-making extends from the rhetoric of the statesman (in the case of Pericles) to the words of an unreliable narrator (in the case of the Mariner). It places Pericles on equal footing with the plague-stricken and gives voice to the Mariner, for better or worse. As such, the beauty of democracy's equality is not without peril.

The present paper is an attempt towards such meaning-making (though I wish to stress at all points the necessary collectivity of such processes). If it is organized around a central thesis, it may be this: that, from our earliest accounts, democracies exhibit a tension between common striving and *anomie*, or lawlessness. If this is the case, a democracy can only thrive if it succeeds in cultivating a meaning of citizenship to counter *anomie* (as Pericles famously attempted to persuade his fellow citizens of the greatness of Athens). Where such meaning is prevalent, democracy shapes the character of its citizens and these citizens, in turn, breathe life into the meaning of their democracy.

The paper is outlined as follows: the first section will look at three essays which provide commentary on the emergence of democracy within the ancient Greek *polis*. The second section concerns Thucydides' account of the Funeral Oration of Pericles and the ensuing plague which struck Athens the following year. The third section then shifts to a discussion of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. A final section will provide furthering remarks.

1. (Briefly) Concerning the Origins of Democracy & Political Theory

Ober (Ober 2007) offers an insightful look into the origins of democracy in his brief paper *The Original Meaning of 'Democracy': Capacity to Do Things, Not Majority Rule*. The title is informative – Ober concludes that the type of power "democracy" originally referred to was the capacity to do things (Ober 2007, 2). He draws attention to *isokratia* ("equality"), *isonomia* ("equal-law"), *isegoria* ("equal-public address"), and *isomoria* ("equal-shares"), and makes the plausible inference that the *iso-* prefix likely refers to distributive fairness (Ober 2007, 5). If this is the case, *isokratia* would mean an equal share in power (Ober 2007, 5). But what kind of power does *kratos* denote?

Here, Ober contrasts *-kratos* with *-arche* (found in "monarchy", "oligarchy", "anarchy", &tc.):

> "rather than imagining the *–kratos* group as sharing the *–arche* group's primary concern for the control of a (pre-existing) constitutional apparatus, I would suggest that the *–kratos*-root terms originally referred to

> a (newly) activated political capacity. This would explain why there is no *monokratia* or *oligokratia*: "the one" and "the few" were regarded as *inherently* strong and capable, through control of wealth, special education, and high birth. So it was not in question whether the one or the few possessed a capacity to do things – the question was whether or not they controlled the apparatus of government". (Ober 2007, 5)

More concisely, I take "democracy" for Ober to be the acquisition of power by those lacking wealth, proper education, and/or nobility. When democracy arrived in ancient Greece, the *dēmos* found itself empowered for the first time. It gained what Ober describes as:

> a collective capacity to effect change in the public realm. And so it is not just a matter of *control* of a public realm but the collective *strength* and *ability* to act within that realm and, indeed, to reconstitute the public realm through action. (Ober 2007, 5)

Setting aside questions of whether collective action is truly political, Ober's article enables us to distinguish "democracy" not just by who is empowered, but also by the type of power on display. Of note, the institutions of Athenian *demokratia* were never centered on elections (Ober 2007, 5-6). But more must be said of the *dēmos*: who constitutes it, and do limits exist on its capacities?

Cammack provides answers to these questions in "The Dēmos in Dēmokratia" (Cammack 2019). Here she notes, "The single most important feature of the term *dēmos* is that it is a collective noun that takes a singular verb" (Cammack 2019, 46). The term referred narrowly to the assembly, broadly to those who participated in politics via collective action (Cammack 2019, 45, 59). She draws critical distinctions between these same individuals when comprising the assembly (and constituting the *dēmos*) as opposed to being considered as individuals (λαοί), or as a collective military unit (στρατός,λαός) (Cammack 2019, 53). She adds, importantly, "The very act of coming forward made an orator no longer simply one of the crowd" (Cammack 2019, 45, n.21).

As textual evidence, Cammack cites the description of the judgement scene depicted on Achilles' shield given in Book 18 of the *Iliad*:

> In the line '[t]he people were gathering in the place of assembly', 'people' is the plural λαοί (497). But when the poet switches to describing the meeting underway, those attending are identified first by *dēmos* and then by λαός, suggesting that, once they have gathered, they are conceived as a single entity (500, 503). (Cammack 2019, 47)

She argues that the *dēmos* constituted a political institution from its earliest recorded history, and that, interpreted as such, *dēmokratia* represents not just the self-rule of the assembly, but – more importantly – the rule of the mass *over* the political elite (Cammack 2019, 46).

On her reading, the *dēmos* did, in fact, have a political identity prior to the emergence of "democracy". The change brought about by this emergence was that the *dēmos* had seized *kratos* – not just the capacity to do things, but, importantly, the assembly gained the capacity to exercise political power over the elite (Cammack 2019, 60). Thus, the only thing which had changed was the internal balance of power within the *polis* (Cammack 2019, 60).

Cammack is aware that her interpretation may be troubling for the modern advocate of democracy:

> The goal of democrats also remains the same: to secure decision-making power in the hands of those who act collectively. But modern democrats face a problem their ancient counterparts lacked, namely how to achieve this in political communities where, as both Aristotle and Hobbes would surely have spotted, there is no *dēmos* in the original sense of the word. (Cammack 2019, 61)

There is no *dēmos* in the original sense of the word because the modern state is far too expansive for the politically voiceless to assemble and deliberate. As such, there can be no modern *dēmokratia*, properly speaking. However, as Ober reminds us, "we are not bound by any past convention, much less by the inventors' original definition: if we can devise a better meaning for a political term, it should be preferred" (Ober 2007, 2).

The importance of breaking with conventions was not lost on ancient Athens. Ten years after the battle of Marathon and under siege from the Persians, "the Athenians decided to abandon their city; they broke up their homes, took to their ships, and became a people of sailors" (Thucydides, Bk. I 18). This dramatic series of events forces us to ask: where exactly *is* the *polis*? In his translation of the *Republic*, Grube notes that a "city (*polis*) is a collection of people, not a collection of buildings" (Plato 1992, 44 n.14). If this is correct, then the Athenian *polis* remained exactly where it had always been.

In "The Battle of Salamis and the Origins of Political Theory", Euben (Euben 1986) traces the origins of political theory to this defense of the Athenian *polis*. He claims that because the invading Persian force did not understand Greek politics, they did not understand the manner in which the Greeks would take to arms: "Unlike the Persians, the Greeks were citizen-soldiers whose courage and power came from being the free citizens, that

their military prowess aimed to protect. The hoplite phalanx … sustained the political equality essential for a free citizenry… it was political equality that made the Greeks so powerful" (Euben 1986, 370). This connection between political equality and power makes a strong claim in favor of democracy.

Euben furthers his discussion by drawing from a series of modern sources. Citing Clifford Geertz, he notes that the successful defense of Athens "became bounded, memorialized, and culturally inscribed, thereby organizing and legitimizing certain forms of Athenian thought and action for three generations" (Euben 1986, 360). On this reading, the Athenians came to define themselves as a people by co-constitutively manufacturing meaning (Euben 1986, 360). However, such actions are not always democratic undertakings, and even when they are, may aim to bring about tendentious outcomes. Furthermore, meaning, once constructed, is subject to erosion – or outright collapse.

Citing Paul Ricoeur's notion that "political understanding" is not "a 'mode of knowledge but a mode of being'", Euben contends that human beings are "creators of meaning in the context of political struggle" (Euben 1986, 361). The point being made here (on my reading) is that the battle of Salamis shaped the Athenians' perceptions of both self and *polis*. If this is the case, it seems reasonable to question whether perceptions of self and *polis* are beliefs which are held in a manner that is fundamentally different from that in which other beliefs are held.

Euben contends the Athenians held such beliefs in a dynamic and fluid manner. As such, he considers them "collective theorists" (Euben 1986, 376), noting that

> the capacity to envision the world other than as it is and reconstitute the world to realize that vision is the basic impulse behind what Sheldon Wolin has called "epic political theory." To the degree that Pericles' Funeral Oration is justified in claiming this as an attribute of the whole people rather than of a few leaders, the city itself emerges as a theoretical actor. And when the plague erodes this confidence in human power to control the subjective impact of events, it also reflects on the theoretical impulse that was part of and an expression of that confidence. (Euben 1986, 376)

After invoking Geertz, Ricoeur, and Wolin, Euben returns to the Platonic dialogues. He notes that, in the *Apology* and *Crito*, "(Plato's) Socrates detaches *arête* from the heroic ethic and reassigns it to philosophical activity" (Euben 1986, 382). Precisely what did this new definition of *arête* demand? Of course, there is no clear answer. But, as

Euben notes the *Crito* vividly depicts, "one reason Socrates refuses exile is that philosophy, or rather Socratic political philosophy as he describes it in the *Apology*, is only possible in Athens" (Euben 1986, 385). To see why this is the case, Euben has drawn our attention to the actions of Themistocles, whose "temporary strategy" at Salamis forged a "permanent way of life", making political theory both "possible" and "necessary" (Euben 1986, 384). In the next section I'll discuss this way of life as it was embodied by Thucydides' Pericles (for better and for worse).

2. (Briefly) Concerning Thucydides' Pericles

a. Oration

Ober (2007) largely omits discussion of the Funeral Oration of Pericles given that it is so well-known (Ober 2007, 6). While this may be true among those who study political theory, the present state of our democracy appears to suggest otherwise with respect to the population at large. As such, it may be worth recounting the general spirit of the speech.

Following Athenian custom, Pericles is chosen by the city to give the Oration "for his intellectual gifts and for his general reputation" (Bk. II 34). This reflects the complex relationship between Pericles and the assembly. While he has emerged *from* the crowd, the aspects of his character make it clear that he is not simply *of* the crowd. Importantly, the assembly possesses some awareness of this complexity.

In the Oration, Pericles defines the Athenian constitution as a democracy due to the fact that "power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people" (Bk. II 37). All citizens are equal before the law (*isonomia*) (Bk. II 37), and all citizens have a stake in the political (Bk. II 40). Concerning the self-interest of Athenians, Pericles reminds the crowd: "we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all" (Bk .II 40). And of the ties which bond Athenians to one another: "When we do kindnesses to others, we do not do them out of any calculations of profit or loss" (Bk II. 40). The Oration also emphasizes that wealth is "something to be properly used", and not an end-in-itself (Bk. II 40).

A particular type of courage emerges from this depiction of Athenian democracy, driving each citizen to meet danger "voluntarily, with an easy mind" (Bk. II, 39).

The importance of this is noted by Balot. In his words, "Democracy generated a specific form of courage, which was based on an individual's correct apprehension of his own self-interest as a citizen and of an appropriate understanding of his relationship to the *polis*" (Balot 2001, 520).

The basis of Athenian military success was "the recognition by ordinary Athenians that they were fighting for what was valuable to themselves as individuals" (Balot 2001, 520). As we've seen from the Oration, the democratic ideal put forth by Pericles ties individual value to the well-being of the *polis*.

Unfortunately, as we read on in the *History*, we find the Athenians struggling to live up to the Periclean ideal (more will be said about this in the next section). On this point, Balot draws two important conclusions: "First, whatever Pericles the *rhētōr* or the character believed about democracy, Thucydides does not allow that the Athenian *dēmos* is an informed democratic citizenry capable of rational reflection about its own values. Rather, the *dēmos* needs Pericles' guidance to achieve success and *eudaimonia*" (Balot 2001, 522). And second, Pericles' "articulation of what constitutes courage derives from, and depends on, actual democratic practice" (Balot 2001, 523). I'll return to these points in the final section of this paper. Prior to that, I would like to briefly discuss Thucydides' account of the plague which struck Athens the next year.

b. Plague

Finding itself in the throes of a plague, Athenian democracy quickly descends into a state of lawlessness (Bk II. 53). Just a few months after the Oration, Pericles' words ring hollow. Thucydides tells us that the Athenians "resolved to spend their money quickly and to spend it on pleasure", and that "No fear of god or law of man had a restraining influence" (Bk. II 53). Of this account, Nielson (Nielson 1986) remarks that it "captures the underlying sentiment of egoistic self-interest and attachment to material goods which had taken increasing hold of Imperial Athens with the growth of trade and the seaport of the Piraeus" (Nielson 1986, 401). Concerning the prevailing spirit of general lawlessness, he borrows from Durkheim an association of "*anomie* with a condition of unregulated passions and strivings, one which threatens to become a disease of infinite desires which cannot, in principle, be satisfied" (Nielson 1986, 401). This directly contradicts the concept of self-interest delineated by Pericles in the Funeral Oration. In response to this state of lawlessness, Pericles re-states his position:

> My own opinion is that when the whole state is on the right course it is a better thing for each separate individual than when private interests are satisfied but the state as a whole is going downhill. However well of a man may be in his private life, he will still be involved in the general ruin if his country is destroyed; whereas, so long as the state itself is secure,

> individuals have a much greater chance of recovering from their private misfortunes. Therefore, since a state can support individuals in their suffering, but no one person by himself can bear the load that rests upon the state, is it not right for us all to rally to her defence? (Bk. II 60)

Pericles furthers his argument by appealing to the greatness of Athens (Bk. II 61) and of previous generations of Athenians (Bk. II 62). However, he must contend with the shifting nature of memory (Bk. II 54).

The Athenians, having recognized Pericles' *arête* just a few months prior, now blame him for the onset of the plague (Bk. II 59). While his skill as an orator allows him to evade serious punishment, he is ordered to pay a fine to the *polis* (Bk. II 65). Thucydides informs us that "Not long afterwards, however, as is the way with crowds, they re-elected him to the generalship and put all their affairs into his hands" (Bk. II 65). We are left with the strong impression that the courage required for Athenian democracy to function properly is susceptible to the whims of the *dēmos*. For this reason, Thucydides concludes that "in what was nominally a democracy, power was really in the hands of the first citizen" (Bk. II 65).

Balot and Nielson both observe that Athenian democracy comes undone after the passing of its first citizen. Balot notes:

> In his account of the Mytilenian and Sicilian debates, and in numerous other episodes, Thucydides shows that once the post-Periclean successors had taken charge, the democratic assembly was divided by lies, greed, and a general fragmentation of interests. If Pericles occupies a position of such special prominence within the democracy (e.g., 2.65), then Pericles' own democratic construction of courage, with its novel emphasis on the epistemology of each citizen, falls apart at the seams—or so Thucydides might explain. (Balot 2001, 522)

Nielson sees this process culminating in the massacre of the Melians. "The Melian appeal to honor, justice, and fair dealing fails. The Athenians have left honor behind, in the past, despite Pericles's talk of Athenian liberality to friends (Thucydides 1972: 147). Their unbalanced souls have become incapable of justice in the present" (Nielson 1996, 404).

c. A note on translation

It should be noted that our own comprehension of Thucydides' *History* is heavily mediated by translation. In a passage that illustrates this point, Allison alludes to a connection between *technē* and *gnōmē* in the speeches of Pericles and remarks that *technē*, like *gnōmē*, *paraskeuē*, and *dianoia* for example, belongs to that class of words which, inasmuch as they express

so-called rational concepts, stand against *anoia*, *tychē*, *amathia*, *paralogos* and the like, which represent the irrational or uncontrollable aspects of human existence. *Technē*, therefore, also stands opposite the plague. In this first speech Pericles emphasizes *empeiria* and *technē*; at 142.5-9 he pits the *amathia* of the Peloponnesians against Athenian *meletē* and claims that naval matters are "as much a skill (*technē*) as any other such things and so cannot be practised as an avocation at any odd moment (142.9)." The word *technē* is not frequent in the History and prior to Book VII is used in its meaning "skill" almost solely of Athenian naval expertise. The passage at 142.7-9 manifestly sets the failure to practise (of the Spartans) in contrast with *technē*, forcing home the identity of *technē* and *to nautikon* for the Athenians and thus further confirming this *technē nautikē* as a fundamental component of Pericles' *gnō*m*ē*. (20)

What then, is our *technē*, against that which plagues us? In the next section, I'll turn to an important work of modern literature which I believe speaks to our own struggle for new forms of thought.

3. (Briefly) Concerning Coleridge's Albatross

Samuel Taylor Coleridge began writing *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in 1797, and it was published the following year. Despite the poem's legacy, this first publication was not met with universal acclaim. Ferguson (Ferguson 1977) notes the following opinion, held by none less than William Wordsworth:

> The Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects; first, that the principal person has no distinct character, either in his profession of Mariner, or as a human being who having been long under the controul of supernatural impressions might be supposed himself to partake of something supernatural: secondly, that he does not act, but is continually acted upon: thirdly, that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other; and lastly, that the imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated (Lyrical Ballads, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones, 1963, pp. 270-71). (Ferguson 1977, 618)

Perhaps due to these deficiencies (or the ensuing criticisms of such deficiencies, or both), Coleridge produced an edition of the poem in 1817 which included an added editor's Gloss. Previous editions had contained three perspectives – those of the narrator, the Mariner, and the captivated wedding-guest. Rather than provide omniscience, the gloss adds a fourth perspectival dimension to the poem. The Gloss appears to provide a short-

cut for the modern reader to grasping an otherwise difficult work to comprehend. To this point, Ferguson emphasizes caution:

> both the entire Gloss and the bulk of critical opinion of the poem may well be editorializing, in that they mold contradictory evidences into a cause-and-effect pattern that the main text never quite offers: the Albatross was a good bird, the Mariner killed it, the Mariner was punished for his crime, the Mariner learned to acknowledge the beauty of all natural creatures and was saved to proselytize for this eminently noble moral position. (Ferguson 1977, 624)

This straightforward interpretation of the text has, uncoincidentally, gained currency in popular discourse is widespread throughout the democratic institution that is American public education. Because of this, I believe Ferguson's questioning of this straightforward interpretation is no minor point. More will be said below. At present, we would do well to consider the context in which Coleridge wrote the poem.

Peter Kitson's essay "Coleridge, the French Revolution, and *The Ancient Mariner*: Collective Guilt and Individual Salvation" sets the poem against the backdrop of "the ultimate failure of the French Revolution to distinguish itself from its oppressive Bourbon predecessors" (Kitson 1989, 197). Having lost hope in "both the supporters of the government and of reform" (Kitson 1989, 202), the author withdraws into the realm of the super-natural. While the Revolution is not mentioned explicitly in the poem, it "throws its gigantic shadow across it" (Kitson 1989, 207). Thus, if Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a poem of escape, it is likely the political, in large part, from which Coleridge wishes to escape (Kitson 1989, 197).

The straightforward interpretation criticized by Ferguson makes no overt reference to the political. As such, this interpretation is problematic for Kitson as well. He notes: "There have been almost as many readings of *The Ancient Mariner* as thereare critics. Few, however, have made any real attempt to place the poem within the context of Coleridge's loss of faith in political action, a context which is demanded by Coleridge's other writings" (Kitson 1989, 204). More specifically,

> As early as February 1795 Coleridge sketches, in his *A Moral and Political Lecture* (revised and published in November 1795 as the first part of *Conciones ad Populum*), what was to become the central tenet of his later political philosophy: 'The annals of the French Revolution have recorded in Letters of Blood, that the Knowledge of the Few cannot counteract the Ignorance of the Many; that the

> Light of Philosophy, when it is confined to a small Minority, points out the Possessors as the Victims, rather than the Illuminators, of the Multitude' (*Lectures* 1795, p. 6). (Kitson 1989, 198)

In light of this context, what are we to make of the Mariner?

Ferguson notes the poem's chronological difficulties for those who would advocate a straightforward reading (Ferguson 1977, 620-1). With respect to these difficulties, Dyck (Dyck 1973) introduces a related set of questions: "Why did he kill the Albatross? The gloss-editor may know (the Mariner is inhospitable) but the Mariner surely does not. Is the adventure real or merely imaginary?" (Dyck 1973, 604). She draws the inference that Coleridge's use of varying perspectives as a literary device was intended to illustrate that any meaning derived from the poem was relative to the particular reader (Dyck 1973, 604). For her part, Ferguson notes, "the moral is that morality appears to involve certainty only if you can already know the full outcome of every action before you commit it" (Ferguson 1977, 624). These are both intriguing possibilities. If nothing else, we are drawn to the inference that careful scholarship elicits a much different reading of Coleridge's poem than the straightforward interpretation which many of us have, unfortunately, grown familiar with.

4. Furthering Remarks

In "Coleridge & the Deluded Reader: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*", Ferguson concludes:

> Coleridge recognizes reading as moral because one's *technē* can never suffice. One acts, Coleridge would say, on the basis of one's reading or interpretation, but if reading and interpretation are the genesis of moral action, they may be infinitely divorced for moral outcome – may, in fact, reverse one's interpretation of the moral value of the act. Reading as a *technē* and morals as techniques of behavior thus become suspect for Coleridge because they imply that experience – and one's interpretation of it – are both stable and repetitive – that one can learn what one needs to know. (Ferguson 1977, 627)

On my reading, this would render the practice of reading a necessary – yet insufficient – ethical condition. Necessary because it broadens our intellectual horizons beyond what is immediately in front of us; insufficient because the solitary reader bears a relation to the text which is particularly susceptible to the risk of solipsism. Or, as Ferguson gathers, "For Coleridge, as for the Ancient Mariner, the problem is that one cannot

know better even about whether or not one is knowing better" (Ferguson 1977, 635).

An earlier statement of this difficulty is articulated by Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, where he observes:

> writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever. When it has once been writing down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. (275d)

Clearly, then, a political *technē* demands more. Balot's account of democratic courage – requiring us to tie theory to practice (Balot 2001, 523) – is instructive. However, Balot also reminds us that "From Thucydides' perspective … Pericles' ideal vision must remain contingent on the wise leadership of men like Themistocles and Pericles" (Balot 2001, 522). In a democracy as expansive as our own, where are we to turn for such leadership? It may instead be the case that a properly functioning modern democracy requires each and every one of us to become, as the Athenians, "collective theorists" (Euben 1986, 376).

This possibility likely places a heavy burden on the formation of properly functioning democratic institutions. On this point, Honig (Honig 2017) calls attention to Rousseau's paradox of politics: the essentially circular relationship between citizens and institutions. Honig argues that "public things" have the capacity to function as a practical analog to Rousseau's theoretical solution (Honig 2017, 18), while also suggesting that a static notion of the set of all public things is likely elusive. Instead, Rousseau's paradox "is not a one-time thing but a quandary that besets every democracy every day, as new members immigrate and are born into it, and established members are every day reimpressed (or not) into its norms anew, with varying degrees of success" (Honig 2017, 18). If this is the case, any solution to Rousseau's paradox involving public things would logically entail a democratic process of meaning-making. Without an adequate such process, our democracy runs the risk of drifting towards *anomie*, and our own individual fate begins to resemble that of the Mariner – not knowing better about whether or not we are knowing better.

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