

CYNICISM AND HELLENISM IN THE *LETTERS OF ANACHARSIS* AND THE *VITA AESOPI**

Among the 'Seven Wise Men' – whose number and name vary according to the tradition – there are two, Anacharsis and Aesop, who have many features in common. As Kindstrand¹ has pointed out, both were foreigners in the Greek world; both travelled and demonstrated their wisdom, and suffered violent deaths. In addition, both sought to propagate an ethical and critical doctrine directed at humans in general and at the Greeks in particular.

Moreover, the legends of Anacharsis and Aesop date from the Archaic period, though the literary treatment of the one and the other Sage was not the same in the Classical and Hellenistic periods – at least from what we know from the preserved texts. In Aesop's case, we have the *Vita Aesopi*, a story written in prose, similar to a novel, and which also compiles examples of the 'fable', the literary genre attributed to Aesop: so this narrative text is a real catalyst of his legend. As for Anacharsis, we have only the collections of the maxims and sayings attributed to him; his name was also given to a set of ten apocryphal letters, dating back to the 3rd century B.C., according to Reuters, and which also includes elements from different origins and sources².

However, there is no denying that the letters of the Scythian Anacharsis present a remarkable thematic unity, unlike other corpora of letters, and in consequence they have a strong ideological content. They also came to be part of the collection of the *Cynic Letters*, a set of fictitious letters written by unknown authors between the 3rd century B.C. and the 2nd century A.D. and attributed to the first Cynic philosophers and to other Sages³. The Scythian's letters consistently contrast Greeks and the barbarians, using dichotomous concepts such as simplicity / sophistication, serenity / anxiety, mental strength / weakness, substance / appearances: in short, the confrontation of nature *versus* culture, conventions, and civilization, that is, φύσις / νόμος⁴.

This does not mean that only the Cynic philosophers were interested in the figure of Anacharsis, nor that these letters can only be understood as a form of propaganda

¹ Cf. J.F. Kindstrand, *Anacharsis. The Legend & the Apophthegmata*, Uppsala 1981.

² Cf. F.H. Reuters, *Die Briefe des Anacharsis*, Berlin 1963. However, P. von der Mühl, *Das Alter des Anacharsislegende*, in *Ausgewählte kleine Schriften*, Basel 1975, 476, suggests that a novel about Anacharsis existed and had been passed on verbally in the 5th century B.C. and even in the 6th century B.C. in Ionia. Von der Mühl follows the suggestion of R. Heinze, *Anacharsis*, *Philologus* 50, 1891, 458-68, who holds that this novel was written in the form of a letter by a Cynic philosopher in the 4th century B.C.

³ Besides Anacharsis, these letters are attributed to Crates, Diogenes, Heraclitus, Socrates and the Socratic philosophers; cf. A.J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles: A Study Edition*, Missoula 1977, and E. Müseler, *Die Kynikerbriefe*, I-II, Paderborn 1994.

⁴ Cf. P. Gómez, *Cartes des d'Escitia*, Actes del XIII Simposi de la Secció Catalana de la S.E.E.C., Tortosa 1999, 191-95.

for the Cynic sect. On the contrary, given that Anacharsis was a member of the group of the 'Seven Sages', it is more correct to think that the Cynic philosophers – like other schools, or like the Sophists or the ethnographers of earlier times – used certain aspects of the legends of the Wise Men for their own aims. By doing so, they contributed, to a greater or lesser extent, to constructing and characterizing these figures – even though, in the case of both Aesop and Anacharsis, their legends were already consolidated when the Cynics used them as 'motifs'. The learning of the two ancient Sages was eminently practical and simple, and the Cynics saw them as their predecessors, though supported by a long tradition⁵. One of the aims of the Cynic propaganda was to attack the false wisdom of the Greeks and so the figure of the truly Wise Man from abroad was very useful to them.

Our purpose is to identify some of these Cynic themes that recur frequently in the legends of the two Sages, studying them in two different literary genres: the epistolary, in the *Letters* attributed to the Scythian Anacharsis, and the narrative, in the biographical tale of Aesop. The Cynic features of the *Vita Aesopi* have been summarized by Adrados in six principal themes: 1. Aesop as a living paradox: ugliness, and wisdom; 2. Aesop and the frugal, temperate life of the Cynic; 3. Aesop against wealth, culture and power; 4. Aesop against the *nomos* and in favour of nature; 5. Freedom and shamelessness; 6. Sexual fulfilment and misogyny⁶.

First of all, we should note that Anacharsis' letters were addressed to people in far-off places: Athens (*Ep.* 1, 2, 3), Thrace (*Ep.* 4, 7), Carthage (*Ep.* 5) and Lydia (*Ep.* 9, 10). The sixth letter is addressed to the 'son of a king', but the content does not make it possible to identify the addressee. In the eighth letter, the name of the addressee, Thrasylachus, is Greek, but he is not one of the famous bearers of this name that we know⁷. Secondly, the addressees are men of social status: kings or nobles (*Ep.* 4, 5, 6, 9, 10), tyrants (*Ep.* 3, 7), the Sage and legislator Solon (*Ep.* 2); however, the first letter is addressed to the Athenians, and the eighth to the unknown Thrasylachus.

Through the eyes of the Scythian Sage – foreign to and detached from the world that he observes – this variety of addressees helps to show that reprehensible and laughable attitudes as well as the conventions that enslave people are not limited to specific individuals or specific places. Solon, Hipparchus, Tereus, Hanno and Croesus

⁵ Cf. R.P. Martin, *The Scythian Accent: Anacharsis and the Cynics*, in *The Cynics. The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, eds. R. Bracht Branham-M.O. Goulet-Cazé, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1996, 136-55. The author considers that Anacharsis' legend, valid throughout Antiquity, was taken up by the Cynics, but not invented or transformed by them.

⁶ Cf. F.R. Adrados, *Elementos cínicos en las 'Vidas' de Esopo y de Secundo y en el 'Diálogo' de Alejandro y los gimnosofistas*, in *Homenaje a Elorduy*, Bilbao 1978, 309-28.

⁷ Cf. G. Cremonini, *Anacarsi Scita. Lettere*, Palermo 1991, 61.

are civilized men, but appearances and the prejudices created by culture and material possessions are their undoing. If Anacharsis supposedly addresses kings and tyrants, this is merely a way of showing that they are among the most enslaved and corrupted by civilization. Likewise, some of the addressees are not of Greek origin, but are closely associated with Greek culture and civilization, represented above all by the Athenians. This is clear from the author's frequent criticisms of the so-called education, the Athenian *paideia*, which has created the three worst evils – discord, voluptuousness and meanness – from which all the other calamities derive, including the arts, which lead to τρυφή, pampering and perversion.

So, to varying degrees, most of these letters criticize, the following themes: power, greed, ingratitude, boasting, false superiority, as well as the passions that trouble the soul such as hatred and jealousy. Interestingly, though, in three letters (*Ep.* 3, 5, 6), the tone is not critical; the speaker's aim is not so much censure as a defence of other ways of life, emphasizing temperance, austerity and therefore freedom – which, of course, corresponds to the Scythian way of life. These wild, rough barbarians, the 'others' (from the Hellenic standpoint) come to be the model of the way of life that can free the Greeks and Greek culture from the barbarism into which they have sunk – as if oppressed by their own civilization.

The need and the desire to find new reference points are frequent characteristics of the Greek and Latin literature from the Hellenistic period onwards. Idealized models and new patterns of behaviour promote values largely ignored by the conventions that govern the relationships between human beings. The distant, original past, the world of the dead, or a remote or even imaginary geography are among the most frequent expressions of this desire for evasion that overcomes those who feel frustrated and deceived by the achievements of civilization⁸. With the disintegration of the Athenian empire and the decline of traditional Greece as a great cultural centre, Greek culture became dispersed. Its past was now idealized, and the components of the culture, including philosophy, rhetoricized. So foreign countries were often used as points of reference, to emphasize the vacuity of Greek society and to remind the Greeks of the wisdom that they had once possessed.

Aesop is an authentic Sage, not a false charlatan like Xanthus. Xanthus is superficial and has all the features of the post-classical period⁹. The choice of Aesop as a critic of false wisdom and the defender of useful, true wisdom is related to the kind of knowledge conveyed in the fables. Using animals as protagonists, the fables give an *exemplum*, a model of what human behavior should be. Under the guise of a pleasant, entertaining story, a fable always claims to be useful, true, serious, and

⁸ Cf. C. Miralles, *Penia y kepos. Sobre algunos ideales de vida en la antigüedad tardía*, BIEH 7, 1, 1973, 79-99.

⁹ Epictetus and Dio of Prusa, who are more or less contemporary with the compilation/composition of the *Vita Aesopi*, strongly debate about the philosophers who are useful and true, and those who are not. Socrates is always an example to be followed.

conveys knowledge which is simple, but entirely appropriate for those keen to learn, for people who are not swayed by rhetoric¹⁰. As for the letter, it is a form that has an exhortative value because it conveys a piece of advice, a doctrine, a moral, if the addressee is willing to listen.

Just as the Scythians –considered models of behaviour by the author of the letters– live on the periphery of the Hellenized world, the fables of Aesop are set in the primitive world of the beginning of time, in which humans and animals shared the same language. Both the Scythians and animals, then, are sufficiently alien to the Greeks to be used as points of reference by those looking for new ideals. And just as the letters of Anacharsis can be considered short narrative developments of maxims attributed to him in the tradition, the fables constitute a narrative framework appropriate for explaining and criticizing vices and faults typical of the human condition –hatred, jealousy, pedantry, and the desire for revenge. So the letters, the fables and the *Vita Aesopi* all express elements that are crucial to the Cynic ideology, the simple and natural way of life with regard to material possessions and ethical attitudes, which defines the *κυνικὸς τρόπος*.

Ingratitude, for example, is the theme of many fables¹¹, and also of the letter addressed to Thrasylochus (*Ep.* 8). And this short missive begins with the description of the behaviour of an animal:

«A dog is a lovely animal by nature because it remembers the person who was kind to it; it guards the house of its benefactors and loyally keeps order until its death».

Through this implicit comparison with a dog, the beginning of the letter highlights the nature of the addressee, apparently an ungrateful man. The transition is swift and forceful:

«But, you are inferior to a dog, which can be equated with humans because it realizes when someone has been kind to it».

Nor does the comparison with animals end here. The author of the letters does not content himself with saying that Thrasylochus is not loyal, as a dog is. He gives more details of Thrasylochus' true nature, by alluding to another animal:

¹⁰ Cf. G.-J. Van Dijk, *Αἴτιοι, Λόγοι, Μῦθοι. Fables in Archaic, Classical & Hellenistic Greek Literature*, Leiden 1997, 3-69, which includes an exhaustive collection of the ancient sources related to the fable, its definition and its aims, as well as a precise summary of the main lines in modern scholarship.

¹¹ Cf. *Vita Aesopi* G 97, where Aesop narrates the fable of the wolves and the sheep (= 153 Perry) in order to exemplify the ingratitude of the Samians towards himself, even though the slave saved them from falling to the king Croesus, thanks to his good advice.

«So I am wondering with whom you could be rightly compared when you show the character of a lion towards your benefactors».

The letter ends by urging Thrasylochus to change:

«In any case, I am trying to save our relationship, because I am still hopeful even with a man like you».

In the *Vita Aesopi*, once again the dog – the animal that lends its name to the Cynic philosophers – is mentioned as an example of gratitude and loyalty. This occurs in an episode whose content and allusions are clearly misogynous. Xanthus sends his slave Aesop to take what he has collected from a banquet «to her who loves me» (§ 44), referring to his wife, but without saying so explicitly. Aesop is angry with his master and takes the chance to ridicule him. He decides to take his revenge for the rudeness and the contempt with which he is treated by his master's wife, and offers the gift to a dog. Confronted by the surprised master and the enraged mistress, the wise slave justifies his action by explaining who really loves the master and why:

«This woman who you think loves you wants her dowry and is ready to leave you for the sake of a little bit of food. Beat your dog, thrash her within an inch of her life, knock her down, drive her off, and she won't go away. She'll forget your mistreatment, she'll turn around and come back to look for her master with her tail wagging. So you ought to have said to me: 'Take it home to my wife' and no 'to her who loves me', for it's not the woman who loves you but the dog» (§ 50).

Anacharsis' second letter compares the Greeks and the barbarians in order to criticize the arrogance of the Greeks, who are undoubtedly wise men, but «by no means wiser than the barbarians» (οὐδέν γε σοφώτεροι βαρβάρων). It is no coincidence that this letter is addressed to Solon, the Athenian Sage and legislator. Lucian says of him: «Make him your friend, get to know what sort of man he is, and you will find all Greece in him, and know already the sum of her glories»¹².

The alleged superiority of the Greeks over the barbarian has no justification, according to the author of the letter¹³. He considers that the non-Greeks can easily show that their thinking is right (καλὰ φρονούμεν), their words agree with the facts

¹² Cf. Lucianus *Scyth.* 5. In this work, Lucian explains that Anacharsis was not the first Scythian who wanted to know the traditions and the customs of the Greeks: upon his arrival in Athens, he met Toxaris, a Scythian compatriot, who introduced him to Solon to ask him to be his teacher. So, Solon is the person to whom the noble Scythian is talking in Lucian's work *Anacharsis or Athletics*.

¹³ On the ideological use of the alleged superiority of the Greeks over the barbarians, see P. Cartledge, *The Greeks. A Portrait of Self and Others*, Oxford 1993, 36-62.

(συμφωνοῦμεν λόγοις πρὸς ἔργα) and accordingly they are like those who live reasonably well (ὅμοιοί ἐσμεν τοῖς ἀγαθῶς ζῶσι).

The ornaments of the body can prevent us from making the right judgements if we do not know that external differences can be simply explained by ancestral traditions: κατὰ νόμους πατέρων, according to the distributive expression used in the Greek text. Humans are superficially different, but their nature, and therefore the signs of stupidity and intelligence, are common to Greeks and barbarians alike: the word used in this second sentence is τὰ αὐτὰ, that is, the pronoun indicating identity. Every individual deserves to be judged by what identifies him as such, especially by the ability to think, which is peculiar to humans and common to Greeks and barbarians (τὸ γὰρ ἐπίστασθαι καλὸν εἰδέναι οὐκ ἀφείλοντο θεοὶ βαρβάρων). So the truly wise man is the one who displays this ability without false prejudices¹⁴. The Scythian claims the ability to think, which the conceited Greeks persist in denying to barbarians. Aesop is a foreigner, a Phrygian, and this sets him apart from the Greeks; in addition, his ugly appearance contrasts starkly with the sharp wit of his words. Aesop gives this advice: «Don't look at my appearance, but examine my soul» (§ 26).

This is why Anacharsis reproaches Solon for not treating him hospitably: when the Athenian hears that Anacharsis is a foreigner, he advises him to look for friends in his own land. Plutarch mentions the same anecdote, but in his version the legislator welcomes the Scythian most amicably, because he is astonished by his intelligence¹⁵. However, the author of the letter asks Solon to justify his hostility; an echo of the Cynic idea of the man as a κοσμοπολίτης, that is, as a citizen of the world. If each of us must seek hospitality only in our own country, it will be difficult for people of different origins to be friends, and the author of the letter laments this. Moreover, the attitude of the Athenian Sage is hypocritical, in Anacharsis' opinion; he considers that Solon rejects a Scythian – that is, a foreign – guest, but would not reject a Spartan dog – also foreign to an Athenian – an animal highly prized for hunting.

For the Phrygian Aesop, the important thing is to be a human, not to have been born in a particular place. This is evident from his answer to the haughty Xanthus when the latter asks him where he come from and where he was born. The slave answers the first question: «From the flesh»; and the second: «In my mother's belly» (§ 25).

The letter addressed to the Carthaginian Hanno (*Ep.* 5) and the other letter addressed to the anonymous «son of a king» (*Ep.* 6) urge them to lead their life in the Scythian way, which, at least as it is described here, comes close to emulating the

¹⁴ The idea that human beings in general have been given intellect, reason and judgement by the gods is also developed by other authors related to Cynicism; cf. D.Chr. 10.27-28; D.L. 6.24, 73; Max.Tyr. 36.1; Ps.-Diogenes, *Ep.* 9.3.

¹⁵ Cf. Plu. *Sol.* 5.2.3. Lucian also explains that Solon welcomed the Scythian warmly (cf. *Scyth.* 5-9, *Anach.* 14, 18).

Cynic ideals. In the first letter, Anacharsis presents Hanno with some simple goods (milk, cheese, meat, bare feet, the ground as a bed, and modest clothes), which, in spite of their simplicity, enable their owner to live in peace – ἄγοντός μου σχολήν – and accordingly, to enjoy the *otium* and to avoid the concerns that spoil the lives of those who are slaves to luxury. Aesop's food is also simple: bread and olives from a bag – just like the bag of the Cynic philosophers; and he shares this food with the priestess of Isis, to whom he also offers wild vegetables and spring water¹⁶. No less modest are the sackcloth garments he wears as he is put on sale between two handsome slaves¹⁷. Unlike his master Xanthus, who buys and pays for the vegetables, the slave can survive with the resources that nature gives spontaneously, as a mother does. But nature behaves like a stepmother when it is forced and punished by the humans who grow plants and cultivate – as the storyteller explains to a gardener in presence of the disconcerted wise man Xanthus¹⁸.

Likewise, people who have no possessions at all are free, and this freedom is the topic of the sixth letter addressed to the anonymous «son of a king». The life of the Scythian is described by Anacharsis as the only possible way of living without ties: a bow and arrows are enough; money and flutes only create enemies and enslave their owners¹⁹. To praise the happy life of those who have no personal possessions, it is necessary to refer to money, since money – τὸ νόμισμα – exemplifies the conventions that tie humans, in contrast to the free exchange of what is spontaneously given by nature²⁰. It may seem contradictory to use the word πολιτεύεσθαι in a context of exhortation to a free life without restrictions, because this verb means literally «to live as a citizen» and the πόλις as an organized human group requires rules and conventions. However, when Diogenes admits that he is «a citizen of the world» or that «the only true commonwealth is that which is as wide as the universe»²¹, even though he rejects the *polis* as contrary to nature, he uses the words πολίτης and πολιτεία as metaphors of the Cynic way of life: so the Cynic cosmopolitanism is not purely negative²². The city as the scene of men's actions was a recurrent theme within Hellenistic philosophy, and this is true of Stoicism as well as Epicureanism and Cynicism, since not even the schools or sects that were most reluctant to engage in political activity abandon the representation, either serious or parodic, of the conditions of good life in the community²³. There is also a Cynic

16 Cf. *Vita Aesopi* G 4.

17 *ibidem* 21.

18 *ibidem* 34-37.

19 According to the Cynic Diogenes, music as well as geometry and astronomy are contemptible disciplines because they are unnecessary and useless; cf. D.L. 6.73.

20 Cf. F. Mestre, *Urbanidad y autosuficiencia: la moneda no es physis*, Actas del XIII Simposio Nacional de Estudios Clásicos, La Plata 1997, 239-45.

21 Cf. D.L. 6.63 and 6.72, respectively.

22 Cf. J.L. Moles, *Cynic Cosmopolitanism*, in *The Cynic*, 105-20.

23 Cf. J. Lens-J. Campos, *Utopías en el mundo antiguo*, Madrid 2000, 168-83.

πολιτεία, which is an ethical attitude, that is, the Cynic way of life that can be led anywhere in the world²⁴, because to the Cynics the *polis* and racial differences mean nothing; for them, freedom and virtue are easier to attain for somebody who rejects the *polis*. Aesop also prefers freedom when he has to answer to Xanthus' ambiguous questions. So, when the master wants to know Aesop's origin, he is exasperated to find that he has to ask not one question, but many, before Aesop replies that he is Phrygian. The slave's answers reflect the ambiguity of the questions. To the first question «Where do you come from?», the slave replies: «From the flesh». And so the master asks a more precise question: «Where were you born?», and Aesop answers: «In my mother's belly». Again, Xanthus puts the question more explicitly: «The devil takes him. That's not what I'm asking you, but in what place where you born?». But Aesop finds a way of avoiding the response that Xanthus wants to hear: «My mother didn't tell me whether it was in the bedroom or in the dining room». Finally Xanthus asks him: «Tell me what you are by nationality», and then the slave answers: «A Phrygian»²⁵.

Therefore, the life of a ruler must be very simple, because wine and pleasure hinder reasoning and prevent the ruler from doing good to those who ask for his help. This piece of advice is offered by Anacharsis to the tyrant Hipparchus (*Ep.* 3), to whom the author of the letter – who is of course aware of Hipparchus' ill fortune – predicts a tragic end for him if he does not change his ways²⁶. The situation of Xanthus is also serious when he risks losing his property without realizing – because he is drunk – that he has bet he will drink all the water in the sea. Once again, the boastful Xanthus is saved by Aesop's sobriety and intelligence; though, ungrateful as ever, he does not grant freedom to his slave²⁷.

The two last letters are addressed to Croesus, the king of Lydia, whose place among the addressees is no surprise as his name was associated with the tradition of the Seven Greek Sages from the time of Herodotus: the Lydian land was a place where all the Wise Men met²⁸ – or at least some of them, including Aesop²⁹. The main topics of both letters are typical: first, they denounce the illusions that afflict humans, subject to their useless and trivial desires; second, they advocate the Scythian way of life as a model to be followed. The name of Croesus is associated with wealth and power, but also with the illusory determination to be considered the happiest man on earth. However, the author of the letter reminds the Lydian king that another Wise Man,

²⁴ Cf. D.Chr. 4.13; Epict. 3.24; Max.Tyr. 36.1; Ps.-Lucian, *Cyn.* 15.

²⁵ Cf. *Vita Aesopi* G 25.

²⁶ Such a prediction seems to indicate the rhetorical – and also anachronistic – nature of these letters, given that the author backs up his argument with topics and stories from the historical and literary tradition.

²⁷ Cf. *Vita Aesopi* G 68-74.

²⁸ Cf. D.S. 9.2.26; D.L. 1.40, 67, 81, 99, 105.

²⁹ Cf. *Testim.* 34-38 Perry.

Solon, already advised him to be careful and to wait until the last day of his life to value his fortune. This advice takes on full significance when we realize that this ninth letter – which is clearly consolatory³⁰ – is believed to have been written after Croesus was defeated and taken prisoner by the Persian king Cyrus in 546 B.C., since it ends with an exhortation that the advice it contains should be passed on to Cyrus and to all the tyrants: every man, including the most powerful, must abandon the idea of amassing a fortune.

This letter is the longest in the corpus and most complex in terms of structure, because it includes the short account –the *apologus*– of an event which the author says he witnessed (ἄκουσον δὲ ἐμῆς ὄψεως ἱστορίαν). The opposition φύσις / νόμος underpins the entire text and is accompanied at the beginning by an opposition between the past and the present, which has a certain Hesiodic flavour. In the remote past, the earth was the common property of gods and humans – a state of Nature, then, which is still the case among the Scythians; moreover, the community between gods and humans was closer, as in a golden, silver or bronze age, because the gods «givers of goods and protectors against evils» (ἀγαθῶν δοτῆρας καὶ κακῶν ἀποτρόπους). However, humans, anxious to divide what was common, insisted on dedicating sacred enclosures to each of the gods separately, which resulted in «discord, hedonism, meanness» (ἔριν καὶ ἡδονήν καὶ μικροψυχίαν) and all the evils that afflict the humans of the iron race: ploughing, sowing, extraction of metals, wars (ἄροτοι, σπόροι, μεταλλεῖαι, πόλεμοι). These techniques allow humans accumulate a range of produce, but the benefit is slight and the only convenience (τρουφήν) obtained is a short life (ὀλιγόβιον). On the other hand, they have abandoned a life in harmony with nature; they are determined to obtain what is not given by nature, but lies beneath it. At the same time, they consider that the discoverer of such an insignificant thing is the happiest man of all. This allusion to Prometheus is in accordance with the Cynicism of this text: contrary to mythical figures, such as Chiron or Heracles, who symbolize life in harmony with nature, Prometheus is portrayed by the Cynic philosophers not as a benefactor of humanity, but as one of the first humans responsible for its collapse and its destruction, because technical progress destroyed the primitive way of life³¹. The life of humans is plunged into deceptions; because of the conventions (νόμῳ), they attach too much importance to things of no value, that is, nothingness (τὸ μηδὲν), and they end up admiring the conventions themselves (ἔπειτα τὸν νόμον αὐτὸν θαυμάζουσι). They do not realize that

³⁰ Cf. E. Suárez de la Torre, *Ars epistolica. La preceptiva epistolográfica y sus relaciones con la retórica*, in *Estudios de Drama y Retórica en Grecia y Roma*, ed. G. Morocho, Léon 1987, 195.

³¹ Cf. D.Chr. 25, where it is reminded that Zeus punished Prometheus because he had stolen fire and he had given it to humans; because fire was to be the cause and beginning of the luxurious and sensual life. On the other hand, Hesiod joins Prometheus' name to Pandora's, the first woman, in an explanation of the distance between present and a past where none of the present evils existed; cf. C. Miralles, *Hesiodo sobre los orígenes del hombre y el sentido de Trabajos y días*, BIEH 9, 1975, 3-36.

wisdom cannot be bought, nor that there are no doctors that cure the soul. Accordingly the truly wise man, the Cynic, is the only authentic man³². Wisdom cannot be acquired and consequently there is no specialist who can teach, administer or replace it, in the way that a doctor can cure a sick body with his technical knowledge. The author of the letter reproaches Croesus for yielding to this evil (τὸ κακὸν), that is, to ambition and to the desire to have many possessions, because wisdom does not consist of this (σοφὸν δὲ οὐδὲν ἦν συμβαλεῖν). Wealth is inseparable from the jealousy of those who wish to steal it, while the man who does not yield to wealth is the only one who has the freedom to speak and to rule (ὕγιης ἄν ἦσθα, ἐλευθέρως λέγων καὶ ἄρχων); lack of self-control and excess necessarily lead to slavery. The only consolation lies in knowing that every human is subject to the wheel of fortune and that those who now have the wealth and the power of Croesus will eventually suffer the consequences of their own avarice. As an example, the author refers to the situation of Cyrus by describing the story of a group of sailors. As their boat ran aground, they had to abandon it along with its cargo; at that time some thieves were sailing past and immediately took the cargo to their empty boat. But then something unexpected happened: the boat of the traders began to sail again, and the boat of the thieves sank under its weight. This story, just like a fable, ends with a moral: «This can always happen to everyone who has some possessions». However, there is an exception: the Scythians, who remained outside the conventions that govern the other people. Among the Scythians, as for the people of the Hesiodic golden age, the land is a property common to all from which they only take what the earth gives spontaneously, but not what it hides; they live off copious and flourishing fruit, and there is no need to plough and sow; they extract milk and cheese from grazing animals, which they protect from the wild animals; weapons are used only for defence, but in fact they never need to use them as they have no possessions. They are themselves the only booty, and the enemy has no interest in them. Solon's advice to Croesus –which according to Plutarch³³, was not to the king's liking– was correct but incomplete, since the Athenian only advised him to wait until the end of his life before assessing his happiness. But Solon was unable to encourage him to lead his life fully, because he was an Athenian, not a Scythian.

The life of Aesop also includes a short episode at the Lydian court. There, Croesus asks him about the destiny of humans; the slave answers by telling the fable about the poor man who went hunting grasshoppers. By telling this fable, Aesop meant to advise the powerful king that one must be merciful and magnanimous towards the weak (no doubt, because of the instability of human fortunes, as in the letter of Anacharsis), and

³² Even though it was in broad daylight, Diogenes was holding a lamp, saying that he was looking for a human (cf. D.L. 6. 41). Likewise, even though there are many people in the thermal baths, Aesop points out that he met there only one person intelligent enough to move a stone on which everybody stumbled at the entrance (cf. *Vita Aesopi* G 65-67).

³³ Cf. Plu. *Sol.* 27.

wisdom cannot be bought, nor that there are no doctors that cure the soul. Accordingly the truly wise man, the Cynic, is the only authentic man³². Wisdom cannot be acquired and consequently there is no specialist who can teach, administer or replace it, in the way that a doctor can cure a sick body with his technical knowledge. The author of the letter reproaches Croesus for yielding to this evil (τὸ κακόν), that is, to ambition and to the desire to have many possessions, because wisdom does not consist of this (σοφὸν δὲ οὐδὲν ἦν συμβαλεῖν). Wealth is inseparable from the jealousy of those who wish to steal it, while the man who does not yield to wealth is the only one who has the freedom to speak and to rule (ύγιῆς ἄν ἦσθα, ἐλευθέρως λέγων καὶ ἄρχων); lack of self-control and excess necessarily lead to slavery. The only consolation lies in knowing that every human is subject to the wheel of fortune and that those who now have the wealth and the power of Croesus will eventually suffer the consequences of their own avarice. As an example, the author refers to the situation of Cyrus by describing the story of a group of sailors. As their boat ran aground, they had to abandon it along with its cargo; at that time some thieves were sailing past and immediately took the cargo to their empty boat. But then something unexpected happened: the boat of the traders began to sail again, and the boat of the thieves sank under its weight. This story, just like a fable, ends with a moral: «This can always happen to everyone who has some possessions». However, there is an exception: the Scythians, who remained outside the conventions that govern the other people. Among the Scythians, as for the people of the Hesiodic golden age, the land is a property common to all from which they only take what the earth gives spontaneously, but not what it hides; they live off copious and flourishing fruit, and there is no need to plough and sow; they extract milk and cheese from grazing animals, which they protect from the wild animals; weapons are used only for defence, but in fact they never need to use them as they have no possessions. They are themselves the only booty, and the enemy has no interest in them. Solon's advice to Croesus –which according to Plutarch³³, was not to the king's liking– was correct but incomplete, since the Athenian only advised him to wait until the end of his life before assessing his happiness. But Solon was unable to encourage him to lead his life fully, because he was an Athenian, not a Scythian.

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to those who wish you well and give good advice. Aesop compares himself with the defenceless grasshopper that clamours for mercy because its happy and harmonious song entertains the walkers, while the storyteller, in spite of his ugly body, is useful because he sings of the sensible existence life of the humans. The words of the slave convince Croesus, who abandons his earlier hostility towards him, so much so that Aesop writes his speeches and fables for the Lydian king and leaves them in his library³⁴. Moreover, Aesop wins favour with Croesus, who allows him to ask for whatever he desires. Aesop asks the king to make peace with the Samians, who have followed the advice of Aesop and have rejected the demand of the monarch to rule their island and to pay him a tribute. The friendly relationship between Aesop and Croesus described by Plutarch³⁵ is also mentioned by other authors, and all the paroemiographers attribute the saying «μᾶλλον ὁ Φρύξ» to Croesus, an expression of his admiration for the Phrygian and his satisfaction that Aesop had said that he – Croesus – was superior to other men as the sea is superior to the rivers³⁶.

The power that Aesop acknowledges in Croesus is described in detail in many exhortations of the *Vita* that refer to good government, especially in the episodes where Aesop plays the role of the Wise Man and of the royal adviser in Lydia, Babylon and Egypt; however, this good government can and has to be applied also to individuals. As far as Anacharsis is concerned (*Ep.* 7), he explains what good government consists of and this time has recourse to myth, since he addresses his letter to the Thracian Tereus, whom he calls «a wicked tyrant». In the view of the Scythian philosopher, the good leader is the one who watches over and cares for his people, as a good shepherd watches over his sheep. The destruction of his subjects – Tereus is the son of Ares, that is, of war – causes the misfortune of the leader: a desert country, supported by mercenaries – just as Tereus was³⁷.

The content and the style of the letters corresponds well to the so-called «Scythian discourse»; the expression is straightforward and sincere, as one would expect from the Scythian Wise Man³⁸. In this respect, the first letter is an important document: it is the only text in the Cynic propaganda that emphasizes the importance of facts and actions rather than the form and the appearances, using as an excuse the problem of the foreign language. We should note here that the conflict created by the ambiguity of the language in the *Vita Aesopi* always reveals Aesop's superiority over his rivals. As

34 Cf. *Vita Aesopi* G 98-100.

35 Cf. Plu. *Sol.* 28.

36 Cf. Zen. V 16, Apostol. XI 3; see also Suid. III, 315, 116 A.: μᾶλλον ὁ Φρύξ. Cf. P. Gómez, *El frigi del mimiamb V d'Herodes*, Ítaca 6-8, 1990-1992, 71-80.

37 Tereus came from Thrace to help Pandion, the king of Athens who was at war with the Thebans. As a reward, he was given Procne –one of the daughters of the Athenian– as his wife. Cf. Str. 9.3.13; Paus. 10.4.8-9; Th. 2.29.

38 Cf. D.L. 1.104. In a Lucian's work, the Scythian Toxaris also points out that the Scythians are not used to speaking in such a pleasant way as the Greeks do, especially when facts are more eloquent than words (cf. *Tox.* 35).

for Anacharsis, he reproaches the Athenians for laughing at him because he does not speak good Attic Greek, but he reminds them that all Greeks and barbarians make mistakes when they speak a foreign language. However, he points out that it is not the power of speech (φωναϊς) that should win respect, but good sense, reason and intelligence (γώμαις); therefore people of all kinds can be found everywhere. The Spartans are a good example: they do not speak Attic well, but they have a good reputation and are famous for their deeds.

The example of Aesop also shows that deeds and speech do not always go together. On several occasions he displays his ingenuity and he also does good deeds, even when he is still dumb, because «he had a defect more serious than his unsightliness in being speechless, for he was dumb and could not talk»³⁹.

The meanness of the Athenians towards those who do not speak perfect Attic Greek once again contrasts with the good temper of the Scythians, who do not criticize a speech – that is, an opinion, a reasoning, a λόγος – if it clearly shows what is advisable, but do not praise the speech that does not have these qualities. The power of speech is a rational faculty of humans and accordingly, what is inherent in humans – their φύσις – is the ability to speak and think, as their ability of structuring a λόγος. This thinking is translated into languages and codes, which correspond with the level of the expression, that is, with the formal level; so, the *way of expressing* this thinking is a pure convention, a specific code which is used by the people of a specific place: it is a νόμος. Consequently, the Scythians are once again superior to the Athenians because they are capable of ignoring the strictly formal aspect of language and of valuing the content. Moreover, the Athenians contradict themselves because, when commercial or political interests are at stake, they accept Egyptian doctors and Phoenician helmsmen, or negotiate with the ambassadors of the Persian king whose Attic is undoubtedly far from perfect. For their part, the Scythians consider that a speech is insignificant (φραῦλον) only when its reasoning (διαλογισμοί) is insignificant. The Scythians do not reject the useful things hidden in the words of a foreigner merely because they are poorly expressed. This is what Anacharsis does when he goes to Greece to learn how its inhabitants lived. When he goes back to Scythia, he takes no gold with him, but he is a better man, as he writes to Croesus (*Ep.* 10). The conclusion of the letter is undoubtedly pointed: it is better to be saved by obeying those who do not speak well than to risk misfortunes by following those who speak perfect Attic. This attitude is typical of ignorant people; it can never be the attitude of a sensible person.

The *Vita Aesopi* also describes situations that stress the ambiguity of the language is emphasized, and once again Aesop shows his superiority because he can adapt form to content, words to deeds in every circumstance, just as Anacharsis advised the

³⁹ That is his ἀφωνίαν (cf. *Vita Aesopi* G 1). Cf. P. Gómez, *De la iniciación poética de Esopo*, Actas del VII Congreso Español de Estudios Clásicos, Madrid 1989, 217-23.

Athenians to do. We have already mentioned the intentionally rude comparison between the wife of Xanthus and a dog, or Aesop's answer to the question about his own identity: in both examples, confusion is created by the lack of precision of the words that Xanthus uses. It is the same imprecision that makes the false philosopher the object of ridicule when he orders the slave to cook φακόν, which is a collective singular, so the slave cooks only one lentil⁴⁰; or when he wants to drink ἀπὸ τοῦ βλανείου; Aesop gives him warm water from his bath although the master meant «after the bath»⁴¹. So as to teach Xanthus how to give orders, Aesop brings an empty lecythus, without oil, for the bath, since the master only said «give me the oil flask»⁴². Likewise, when Xanthus orders Aesop to organize a dinner and to cook «the best, the finest thing imaginable», or when he sends the slave to the market to buy «anything inferior, anything worthless you can find»⁴³, Aesop always serves tongue, prepared in different ways, sometimes boiled, sometimes roast and sometimes spiced: as Anacharsis, as well as other Wise Men, will say⁴⁴, nothing is more powerful than the tongue, and nothing worse, because it makes all kinds of knowledge and culture possible, but it also causes deception, wars, jealousy and discord.

Unlike other Wise Men in the Greek tradition, the legends and testimonies of Aesop and Anacharsis always present them as ambiguous in their relationship to Greece. In spite of their integration in the Greek tradition –demonstrated by Plutarch's *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men*⁴⁵– their perspective is always that of the outsider; and this perspective is particularly conducive to criticism of Greek culture and civilization. This is shown by the *Letters* of Anacharsis –with the exception of the tenth and final letter, which is the only one mentioned by Diogenes Laertius in his biographical account of the Scythian⁴⁶. The other letters show that Anacharsis, who has come to Greece to learn the ways and customs of the Greeks, becomes a fierce critic of his hosts; eventually he concludes that in fact there is little to envy in them and that their entire culture is in fact a lie⁴⁷. In contrast, in the last of the Scythian's letters, Anacharsis asks the all-powerful Croesus to allow him into the court of Sardis; he admits that his aim is to return to Scythia –a better man now that he has learnt from the Greeks.

40 Cf. *Vita Aesopi* G 39 and 41.

41 *ibidem* 40.

42 *ibidem* 38.

43 *ibidem* 51 and 54 respectively.

44 Cf. D.L. 1.105. Plutarch attributes this sentence (cf. *Moralia* 38 a, 146 f) to Bias. Thales and Solon also considered language as something that is both the best and the worst. Cf. Kindstrand, 111-12; 136.

45 On the relation between these two Wise Men in the work of Plutarch, cf. S. Jedrkiewicz, *Il convitato sullo sgabello*, Pisa-Roma 1997, 72-74; 86; 90.

46 Cf. D.L. 1.102. P. Gomez, *Savis i tirans: la correspondència dels Set Savis al llibre I de Diogenes Laerci*, Ítaca 18, 2002, 191-209.

47 Cf. G. Cremonini, 63.

Greek culture is a set of values, ways of life, interests, models of behaviour, that add up to a multiple entity. So the vision that Wise Men such as Aesop and Anacharsis form of it will also be multiple. From the margins of Hellenism, they construct the figure of a Wise Man from the counter-culture; even when they appear as adopted Greeks, they retain a certain distance from the essence of Greek culture. Perhaps this distance is due to the fact that a specific culture (in this case classical Greek culture) usually identifies its positive values with emblematic characters from inside its own tradition – for instance, the figure of Solon vis-à-vis Aesop or Anacharsis. As a consequence, these values are presented as serious and respectable. And this same culture presents negative values through characters that are alien to it – «others» who, from their position of «otherness», help to define its identity. These negative values are thus projected humorously and critically, just as the cynics did. The cynics were faithful heirs to the Greek tradition, but in their hands protest, subversion and mockery became the norm, through what is known as σπουδογέλοιοι: a parody of what others, in their vanity, consider to be serious⁴⁸.

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⁴⁸ Cf. C. Miralles, *Los cínicos una contracultura en el mundo antiguo*, EC 61, 1970, 347-78, especially 356.