A CONTEXT FOR PLATO'S DIALOGUES

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I. Not just Plato, but the whole dialogic literature produced by several direct pupils of Socrates

The supposed disproportion between Plato and every other strictly contemporary writer of Socratic dialogues, reinforced as it is by an unbridgeable divide between the considerable knowledge available to us about the former (along with the immense interpretive work devoted to his writings) and the meagre knowledge available about the latter, has generally prevented the scholarly community from paying due attention to what Plato may have had in common with his fellows, and from appreciating how the availability of many Socratic dialogues for contemporary readers and the success of the *Sokratikoi logoi* (as a literary genre) may have affected the shaping of *any* new Socratic dialogue, his own included. When, for instance, one speculates upon the continuity/discontinuity of Plato's thought, or on the fidelity/infidelity of the pupil towards his master, or on the supposed subterranean «unity» of the dialogues despite a number of obvious differences, the whole literary and philosophical Socratic movement, of which Plato was just an eminent part, imperceptibly but almost irresistibly slips out of sight, much as if it were of no relevance. More generally, it is all too easy to persuade ourselves that it is so difficult for us, as students of Plato, to find our way through the tremendous intricacies of his works and ideas, that it is just about impossible to take the other Socratics into account at all, although in principle one surely should. Is there any argument more effective than this one, in dissuading scholars from reminding themselves of the importance of the melting pot which presided over the invention (and the subsequent, quick affirmation) of the genre?

Another –and probably not less persuasive– argument against a holistic approach to the earlier Socratic literature is the suspicion that nothing really significant is expected to emerge from such a context taken as a

1. To Professor Antonio López Eire, Salamanca, great connoisseur of most topics dealt with here, as a token of friendship.

context, i. e. apart from a number of individual authors, titles, fragments and pieces of indirect evidence. For, one could ask, what can we expect to learn from Giannantoni's *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae* (1990), if we put aside the later Socratics, i.e. those who failed to know Socrates personally? This strong prejudice is still common, since it is so difficult to establish a truly enlightening bridge between Plato's work, Xenophon's *Socratica*, and what we still know about the other direct pupils of Socrates and their works. All these documents are still taken as being of little help for the study of Plato, and therefore no definite impulse is likely to come from such quarters. Worse still, recent scholarship on Xenophon may have involuntarily reinforced such an assumption by stressing that emphasis on comparison with Plato imperils a sound understanding of his or other Socratics' *Socratica* since the comparison is too often in their disfavour, and that it may be advisable to study these authors without hurry for comparisons[2].

Nevertheless, I am prepared to argue that such a context is far from being invincibly opaque and therefore irrelevant for the understanding of Plato's dialogues. Quite the contrary, I will try to show that there is a very enlightening viewpoint from which we can still look at the whole and draw certain significant (or even very significant) inferences. In particular, I hope to show that it is the perception of this whole, with corollaries pertaining to the interpretation of Plato's dialogues and related topics, that can be substantially reshaped.

What I plan below is an overview of the whole, rather than an attempt to argue for this or that point of detail, and no lengthy discussion of the relevant literature will be included in the present paper. Likewise, certain unorthodox ideas about Plato's dialogues will be asserted without much discussion here. This matter has been dealt with in more detail elsewhere[3], and will hopefully be the subject of further research.

II. The Socratic literature taken as a whole: something rather spectacular

Let me begin with a relatively minor and frequently overlooked point: the quantitative side of the story, i.e. how many Socratic dialogues, treatise-like (or pamphlet-like) works and books were authored by the whole group of Socrates' direct pupils. On this matter we know enough to give approximate but not imprecise figures. First, we know that Plato and Antisthenes wrote in total about a hundred works (consisting in all of a

2. To this effect it may be enough to mention the works of such contemporary scholars as Michel Narcy, Donald Morrison and Louis-André Dorion, as well as the conference *Xénophon et Socrate* (Aix-en-Provence, Nov. 2003, Proceedings in preparation) and the conference *Letteratura Socratica Antica* (Senigallia, Feb. 2005, Proceedings in preparation).

3. I refer especially to four recent papers: Rossetti 2001a, 2004a, 2004b, and 2005.

much larger number of books); secondly, it is evident that Xenophon's *Memorabilia* encompass some sixty dialogic units distributed across thirty-nine chapters and four books; thirdly, most scholars agree that a series of other Socratics –Aristippus, Crito, Simmias, Glaucon, and Simon– each authored a book comparable to Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, with one or two dozen[4] short Socratic dialogues. It is therefore almost certain that at least one hundred and fifty mostly short dialogic units centering around Socrates were contained in the comparable miscellaneous works authored by Xenophon, Aristippus, Crito, Simmias, Glaucon and Simon.

Once we are reminded of this, it is not difficult to conclude (a) that the group authored no less than two hundred works contained within a larger number of books, and (b) that their writings included a somewhat larger number of Socratic dialogues of different length, several very short dialogic units included: possibly three hundred units, or possibly more.

The second clue. Only two or three Socratics (two or three from among a good dozen, or perhaps over fifteen)[5] are known to have authored not only dialogues but other kinds of books: Antisthenes, Xenophon, and Plato if we consider the latter's epistle(s), *Apology* and treatise-like dialogues (notably the *Timaeus* and the *Laws*). The vast majority of these writers seem to have authored only dialogues, and perhaps only Socratic dialogues. For this and other reasons, the floruit of genuine Socratic dialogues is likely to have coincided with the very first decades of the fourth century rather than in the middle decades of that century.

If so many similar works were actually authored, they probably met with remarkable success and reached a relatively wide readership. Besides, these writings would have evoked a recent past describing people who were known, and the characters in them were often portrayed in the act of talking and thinking, much as if the reader were dealing with (anomalous) theatrical texts: these features, as well as the fame of Socrates and the intrinsic value of several Socratic dialogues, no doubt served to reinforce the interest in, and support of, a reasonably wide readership, perhaps even outside Athens. Conversely, had the Socratics not succeeded with their dialogues, would they have insisted so much in the exploitation of this particular literary genre?

In turn, their success suggests that, at least at the beginning, the Socratics operated as a group, and, what is more, that they had an abiding interest in having their dialogues easily recognizable as belonging to the same literary genre (and therefore comparable in appeal to the dialogues already available). Xenophon himself could hardly have decided to offer his own collection of Socratic memories at a relatively later time, unless he knew that despite the passage of time there was still an interest in this particular kind of book.

4. Nine to twenty-three, we are positively told in Diog. Laert. II 84 and 121-124.
5. For details, see Rossetti 2005, 53-56, to be supplemented by Rossetti 2001a, 18-21.

In this way, the melting pot starts to become less obscure[6], and a whole context begins to take shape.

III. Towards a criterion for distinguishing between more and less genuine portraits of Socrates

My next point will surely meet some resistance, at least initially. We know that both a number of Platonic and Xenophontean dialogic units, and a number of anecdotes probably drawn from other dialogic units of the same period[7] show approximately the same Socrates, a character whose behaviour is easily identifiable: a Socrates who does something with words (rather than teach or lodge claims), and a character who in different moments participates as a more or less provocative intellectual; a man who likes to question others and who easily devises counter-examples and other disturbing analogies, thus making his interlocutors slightly less superficial and more thoughtful; a man who despite a measure of aggressiveness still treats his interlocutors with unfailing benevolence. As far as I can see, no Socratic of the first generation fails to bear testimony to this kind of Socrates. Though often forgotten, *this* Socrates portrayed «at work» is the Socrates we are all aware of knowing. One could object that in this way we come to form only an approximate and flexible idea of the man; however, this is surely no cause for concern, since the same will happen whenever we attempt to describe any living, dead or fictional person and the behaviour that is customary to them. Therefore, a degree of flexibility and approximation should be considered as something that can help rather than hinder our task of recognition.

Quite the contrary happens when Socrates becomes the bearer (and, to a certain extent, the warrant) of individual doctrines, because when he expounds doctrines he no longer recognizably behaves as Socrates. For, when the philosopher is a character prepared to outline a doctrine of his own and argue for its tenability, he consistently displays only a few marks of the universally recognizable philosopher. Conversely, when Socrates happens to be portrayed «at work» (and is therefore immediately recognizable as the same figure we know from dozens of other dialogic units) his behaviour bears testimony to certain attitudes or values embedded in action, but he is no more the bearer of individual doctrines.

This point will not be argued in detail here. However, for readers of Plato and Xenophon, of the remaining fragments of Aeschines' *Miltia-*

6. Another point ought to be mentioned: it is likely that in his later years Socrates trained his friends in imitating, narrating, putting into writing and otherwise recreating his own dialogic performances. On this point more has been considered in Rossetti 2001a, 21-29 (see also Rossetti 1991, 21-40).

7. See Rossetti 2001a, 18-21.

des, *Alcibiades* and *Aspasia*, or of those pertaining to Phaedo's *Zopyrus*[8], it is quite easy to distinguish between those dialogues where the portrayal of a man at work with words prevails[9] and those which, by contrast, take as their core a point of doctrine (normally at the expenses of the vividness and recognizability of the philosopher). So far as I can see, this is simply undeniable and opens the avenue to a reinforced version of Vlastos's well-known theory of «two Socrateses»[10].

Consequently, if there is a widely recognizable Socrates, then there is a case for reconsidering the so-called Socratic problem –more so indeed, since when we refer to a typical mode of behaviour, we can in fact rely upon a well-established cultural identity, and thus upon a standard image of Socrates which had the support of most Socratics without significant exceptions or discrepancies. On the contrary, when our sources attribute to him this or that doctrine, it is extremely difficult to single out points of doctrine supported by converging bodies of evidence. It is therefore much more productive to exploit what we have been told by many authors about Socrates' behaviour, the attitudes stemming from this and the values implied therein, than to try to ascribe to him the intellectual commitment to a given theory or argument[11]. For in the first case one[12] may feel expected to evoke the image of *the same* character and will therefore do everything possible to adhere to that image, while in the second case one must keep track of a whole line of thought (a statement together with some arguments in support, or an even more comprehensive theory), and it may be objectively difficult to remember exactly how others had formerly supported a given statement. Besides, when dealing with doctrinal bodies we may lack points of comparison suitable for serving as strictures. And it also seems reasonable to assume that it is much more difficult to preserve an accurate memory of individual doctrines and teachings than of the peculiar habits of a well-known (and beloved) person, the way in which he typically behaved and his various other personality traits. For the flux of Socratic dialogues may well have contributed to keeping the memory of Socrates alive, although not without giving rise to a rather standardized portrait of him, thus to a simplified identity. Moreover, there is ample evidence for how Socrates educated his friends to prepare careful reports of his talks, wisely accounting for the dynamics that presided over individual exchanges[13].

8. The basic evidence is available in Giannantoni's *SSR*.

9. Sometimes this is the case only in parts of a given dialogue, as in the *Phaedo*.

10. Vlastos 1991, 45-80. A passing remark on Cicero at the end of this paper is also relevant for the question of the «two Socrateses».

11. This is a point I have argued in detail elsewhere (Rossetti 2000a & 2000b).

12. By 'one' I mean he who is going to author another Socratic dialogue.

13. In this point see note 6 above.

IV. Treatises replaced by dialogues

Behind the few observations made so far, there is another issue at stake –namely, a powerful change in the standards considered acceptable for the type of text that most appropriately expresses one's knowledge, wisdom, or philosophy.

It is widely known that, at least since Anaximander, those Greek intellectuals equipped with a body of knowledge of their own to establish and circulate –knowledge that mostly concerned individual natural phenomena and the world as a whole– found it most suitable to write a comprehensive book as a means of presenting a more or less structured body of doctrines, supporting them to the best of their ability, and implicitly to claim to have been successful in their efforts. In this way a similar communicational strategy came to be adopted regularly enough to give rise to a standard[14].

Such a standard was largely put aside by Zeno and the most celebrated Sophists, who seem to have set up something remarkably different: rather provocative treatise-like booklets such as Zeno's set of paradoxes, Antiphon's *Tetralogies*, Gorgias' *Peri tou me ontos* and epideictic discourses (*Helen*, *Palamedes*, *Epitaphios*), the dispute between Protagoras (or Corax, or Tisias) and Euathlos, and, to some extent, Prodicus' *Heracles* as well as the anonymous *Dissoi logoi*. Each author expects his audience (or readership) to approve of what he argues at its face value, while expecting the reader to become more or less aware of something lying behind the work's outer veneer: what the author truly believes as something sharply distinguishable from what he explicitly claims in his work. For it is simply inconceivable that the author should formally endorse most of these explicit claims (e.g. that Achilles is unable to reach the tortoise, or that nothing exists, or that the Euathlos dispute cannot be settled). The author's subjectivity clearly lies elsewhere, at another level, and the reader who wants to identify this is often left on his own. The final meaning of the paradoxes, the author's mastery of persuasion pro and contra, the author's supreme dominion in rejecting a number of well-established beliefs, and variations within the genre, all form part of what these writers normally avoided making explicit.

The new standard[15] is ostensibly more flexible and complex than its precursor and is marked by the adoption of two levels of meaning, of which one is manifest and indisputable while the other remains strictly implicit and can only be detected by skilled readers. However, a point of

14. A dozen of works are known as *Peri physeos* and are often marked by the powerful individuality of their authors. Despite every difference, I am here daring to pay heed to a number of common features.

15. Despite the obvious importance of this feature, very little literature is available (notably Noël 1994 and Natali 1999).

continuity survives, since both *physiologoi* and Sophists share the idea that the reader should convince himself that the author is not only competent and skilled but also right, or basically right. Both groups claim that their writings offer reliable and important ideas and arguments that deserve a permanent place in the reader's culture and learning, i.e., they lay a claim to glory for their ability to offer seemingly irresistible proof in support of their *demonstranda*. All in all, it is difficult to find exceptions to this rule among the men of science in the fifth century.

By comparison, the efforts of most Socratic writers were remarkably different. Antisthenes, Xenophon, and perhaps Aristippus authored both Socratic dialogues and other prose writings uninfluenced by the adoption of the dialogue form, but Aeschines of Sphettus, Phaedo, Simon, Crito, Simmias, Cebes, Glaucon and Plato, as well (conjecturally) as Euclides of Megara and Alexamenos of Teos, *abandoned for once and for all* the treatise form (and the Sophistic pamphlet form), authoring only[16] Socratic dialogues. This latter was a major and sudden occurrence: for a period of time towards the beginning of the fourth century, new ideas in philosophy were no longer launched by means of long or short presentations, but only (or almost only) by means of dialogues. Plato's aporetic dialogues in particular strive to represent people who, in the act of becoming perplexed when confronted by unexpected remarks, find it necessary to look for a more appropriate answer; or else they represent Socrates in the act of preparing a new trap for his interlocutors, depending on how they have reacted to a previous counter-example. This is tantamount to saying that, at least for a while, Plato and some (or most) other Socratic writers tried to portray Socrates' interlocutors in the act of thinking, and therefore in the act of adopting or modifying a theoretical stance *impromptu*[17].

A comparison with the Sophistic antilogy may be in order here. The Socrates who has a penchant for counter-examples and other traps does in fact adopt a refutative attitude; however, thanks to the basically cooperative kind of relation set up by the philosopher, the interlocutor feels himself in no way encouraged to maintain his point despite Socrates' counter arguments, but rather to become perplexed and search for a better assessment of his own ideas. This, in turn, is likely to remind the reader that the Tragedy and Comedy (at least from Sophocles and Aristophanes onwards) had already accustomed the Athenian public to the portrayal of people in the act of becoming perplexed and, sometimes, of agreeing to reconsider their beliefs and lines of action. Thus, thanks to fifth century Athenian theatre, something at least comparable had beco-

16. Of course we have to make a minor exception to the rule in the case of Plato's *Apology*, Epistles and Epigrams.

17. We know that in both Xenophon and Aeschines Socrates is very often portrayed as launching unexpected analogies, comments, and ideas, so that interlocutors have to reconsider their previous certainties.

me common practice several decades before the very beginning of the Socratic dialogue. The question that therefore arises is this: what may have been new in the earlier Socratic literature with respect to such a well-established and well-known theatrical experience?

The most obvious opposition is between the host of outer and unexpected events that do change the life of the comic or tragic hero and, on the other hand, the rather quiet dialogue taking place in a context where almost no disturbing event is likely to affect the exchange with Socrates (Alcibiades' interruption in the house of Agathon in Plato's *Symposium* is a rare exception). Nor do the interlocutors of a philosophical dialogue show the least interest or expression of such feelings as fear, hope or curiosity[18] in what is or could be happening elsewhere while they are involved in a talk, to the point that one has the impression the world has stopped for a while. And although all theatrical characters endorse a certain position in strict connection with the many contexts in which they feel immersed –be this context emotional, cognitive, social, economic, legal or any other– Socrates' interlocutors happen to be invited to give their opinions in a context void of immediate interests or strictures. Therefore, those interlocutors tend to give their free opinion rather than pursue an aim or to feel prompted by something related to the context (Euthyphro's religious and legal problems, for instance, play no role at all in his attempts to refine a definition of piety). Moreover, while the tragic and comic *agon* tend to portray well-balanced oppositions, a Socratic dialogue hardly results in a competition on equal terms: the interlocutor may possibly hope to be treated as a peer, but this most often remains just a prima facie impression, belied by the sequel of the talk. Thus, a Socratic dialogue could hardly be taken for a philosophical *agon,* and all the more when the interlocutor is encouraged to do his best in order to set up objectively reliable sentences, and therefore become responsible for the quality of his claims (from whence arises a measure of shame if he does not resist the cross-examination). As a matter of fact, these interlocutors are often conceived of not as people who are particularly determined to prevail or necessarily irritated by Socrates' counter-examples and objections, but simply as characters who find themselves in difficulty. It is therefore no surprise to note that, while the theatrical poet knows the upshot of the drama and may well be taken for an «omniscient» author, the authors of Socratic dialogues might not have considered it so important to foresee and prepare a happy end.

As these somewhat sketchy remarks will suggest, even though it differs to the otherwise marvellous experience of Athenian theatre and its various features, Socratic dialogue is also characterised by a clearly identifiable method of scene-setting.

18. The opening of the *Charmides* may be taken as an exception to the rule.

Moreover, in Plato's aporetic dialogues, as well as in some of Xenophon's *Socratica* and elsewhere, no specific conclusion or definite «lesson» can be drawn from the exchange, and Plato has been especially careful –skillfully so– to avoid proffering notions and arguments that might seem basically unalterable and hence suitable to be learnt. And sometimes (one thinks, for instance, of the discussion of exegetical points in the *Protagoras*, or the *Euthyphro*, or the *Laches*) he actively prevents his readers from forming a clear idea of the goal(s) towards which he was imperceptibly leading them[19].

When something of this kind happens, it is the dialogue's predicative content that becomes unstable, since no definite *demonstrandum* surfaces. It is probable that other Socratic dialogues of the period were remarkably more palatable and explicit in their method, allowing the emergence of particular teachings from the portrayal of an exchange with Socrates; however, at least Plato was ostensibly able to establish a new standard: a kind of dialogue which proffers no definite teaching, but is subtle enough to support the implicit claim of its author as a philosopher *optimo jure*, a kind of dialogue where necessary elements of understanding may well lie *behind* the outer appearance of the exchanges. Admittedly, this may not always have been the case, since the collection does include dialogues where no subterranean «truth» lies behind what we are told and portrayed: so it is with most of Xenophon's *Socratica* and a few of the Platonic dialogues (for example, the *Phaedo*, though with some exceptions towards its end).

But first, the reader would do well to consider Xenophon's *Memorabilia* IV 2. Here, the poor Euthydemus is literally destroyed by the battery of counter-examples delivered by a smiling but extremely aggressive Socrates (significantly, when Euthydemus finally throws in the towel and abandons the conversation, Socrates has *no* words of reassurance to offer him). For a reader (or commentator), it is relatively easy to note that Socrates dared to administer to Euthydemus a dose of argument that, to put it bluntly, would be strong enough to kill a horse; but how many commentators or readers have realized that no counter-argument adduced by the philosopher during this exchange was in fact valid as an objection against the general statement(s) endorsed by his interlocutor? At every step, Socrates evokes very special circumstances where the general rule may in fact deserve to be suspended for a while, but in addition he suggests –and only suggests– that they invalidate the corresponding general statement. Now it is of the utmost importance to appre-

19. Consider the scholarly debate concerning the right definition of piety which has often been traced to the *Euthphro*. In my own commentary (Rossetti 1995, 170-186), I argued in detail that, towards the end of the dialogue, Plato's Socrates positively obstructs the search for a reasonable definition. This feature undoubtedly marks other aporetic dialogues too.

ciate the fallaciousness of the outcome of *every one of* these counter-examples, for otherwise how could the questions arise of whether the responsibility for a whole set of fallacious inferences lay with Socrates or with Euthydemus, of whether Socrates were portrayed as being aware of the fallacious side of the story, whether Xenophon were aware of this, and what it may have meant for him to devise and write so anomalous an exchange? But not to raise such questions would mean remaining at the mere surface of the story!

That said, let me turn to Plato and offer another sketchy example. It is almost impossible to capture the *ratio* of his *Meno*, because it is marked by too many unexplained slippages from subject to subject. As a matter of fact, judging from the opening pages, we can only assume that this is simply another of the so-called aporetic dialogues; but then, thanks to a well-studied objection, quite another atmosphere surfaces when Socrates reveals a sort of faith in the *anamnesis* and claims (wrongly, I presume) to be able to offer sound proof in support of this theory simply by leading the young slave to discover how one has to operate in order to double the area of the square. If this were the core of the dialogue, it would have been possible to downgrade the opening section and take it for a rather anomalous introduction; but in the sequel, Socrates outlines a theory about the teachability of virtue which may be taken as incompatible with the idea that the slave has not just learnt at that very moment how to double a square. He then considers, at some length, the notion of hypothesis; and subsequently, he undertakes a battle against the Sophists, so coming to offer a defense of the right opinion while casting doubt on the possibility of discovering «true politicians».

In these conditions, one simply cannot avoid looking for a different key, for a unifying idea behind all these thematic areas. From my point of view, it is not important to establish the nature and position of the *ratio* of the whole: it is enough to understand that the dialogue forces its readers to go in search of any such key.

There is enough to conclude, I dare presume, that the Socratics concocted an easily-recognizable and highly creative –or even revolutionary– new communication formula. Among its qualifying features[20] surely we should count the portrayal of an ongoing thinking process which may not lead to any conclusion or final output. In this way, a generic analogy with the Sophists' two-level communication strategy does no doubt surface, but at face value a Socratic dialogue often fails to highlight any unifying thesis duly supported by arguments and, secondly, the covert message lying behind the surface is often much more difficult to identify.

However, it is the comparison with the «old» treatise standard that most effectively helps us understand how exceptional the invention of

20. Something more may be found in Rossetti 2001b, 171-174.

the inconclusive (thus «open») Socratic dialogue may have been. For Greek philosophers began once more to write treatises a few decades later; and since then, the treatise has again become the prevailing standard for the whole of western philosophy (and science), to the point that only a minority of philosophers have been able to abstain from the implicit claim of being wholly convincing. Indeed, the search for an encompassing philosophical system has become an almost intemporal standard, and only in the twentieth century did the ideal of the philosophical system face a serious crisis. Now, if we consider that before Aristotle, only Antisthenes and Xenophon dared to resume the treatise form without hesitation (while Plato remained on the borderline), it becomes apparent that with their methods, the Socratics orchestrated a true (though short-term) revolution in philosophy.

V. More about the success of the Socratic dialogues

Whereas during the first decades of the new century the Socratics were extremely prolific as writers, it is practically impossible to find works authored by contemporary philosophers unaffected by Socraticism. Worse, it is doubtful whether, during the first decades of the new century, there were any other other intellectuals who might have distinguished themselves as philosophers authoring philosophical works and remaining deaf to the siren of Socraticism. Handbooks fail to draw attention to so unexpected a phenomenon, but was there *any* such Greek philosopher? And how many texts written in the first decades of the fourth century are known (a) for being philosophical in character and (b) for ignoring or at least showing only a marginal interest in Socrates, his teaching, and his followers? As is well-known, the philosophers active in Greece during the fourth century were former pupils of either Socrates or Plato or some other Socratic writer, or of Aristotle. The few «other» names known to us include (a) the late Gorgias and the late Democritus, although they may well have authored most of their works *before* the beginning of the fourth century, (b) Isocrates and the author of the Derveni Papyrus, who both certainly wrote something of interest for philosophers and had some interest in philosophy, but never seriously claimed to be philosophers, (c) Archytas of Tarentum, whose contribution to philosophy remains completely hidden from us, (d) Metrodorus, the Democritean who autored a poorly known *Pery physeos*. Significantly enough, Aristotle himself has *nothing* to say about the fourth century philosophers who were not Socratics (Archytas aside), although he made a great number of references to *every* fifth century philosopher known to us, as well as to several Socratics.

If so, even assuming that we do not know enough about the «unsocratic» philosophers of the time, we cannot but acknowledge that there

is a conspicuous lack of contemporary philosophers rooted in traditions differing from Socraticism; and it is much as if, towards the beginning of the new century when all these «nouveaux philosophes» came to affirm themselves and to hold the stage, those that remained deaf to the new siren played a noticeably decreasing role in the philosophical community. Now, in all likelihood, both events were concomitant, and probably not independent of each other. And if we consider how coolly Plato had treated his predecessors[21], one begins to suspect that, in face of the new style of philosophizing introduced by the Socratics, the old philosophical traditions may well have lost much of their appeal. This is a matter upon which there is almost no literature, and it is almost unknown to historians; however, whatever the dynamics and the interrelation were, concomitance speaks of a first-order event, wholly unexpected because it would imply a sharp decrease in intellectual pluralism[22].

Let us now consider what we can infer from this event in order to improve our understanding of the role played by the Socratics *as a group*. If at this time there really existed no valid opponent to the Socratics, then a tremendous process of «socratization» of the very notion of philosophy is likely to have taken place. Moreover, if the Socratics did indeed come to hold the stage[23], then contemporary readers of philosophical books were possibly aware of how new this kind of communication strategy was.

On these grounds should we not speak of a new and unique literary and philosophical age, and a new and unique period of supreme creativity? At the time, the new philosophy may well have attained both a high degree of sophistication on the part of its protagonists, the Socratics, and a high degree of visibility in the eyes of contemporary readers. Their innovations might very well have given the impression of the coming of a «new age» to an already glorious Greek philosophical tradition.

The magic moment may have been somewhere during the decade of 395-385 B.C., when the Socratics quickly became the «nouveaux philosophes» of their time, and the intellectual creativity of some reached a marvellous climax. A spectacular gap between old and new ways of philosophizing, of being a philosopher, and especially of authoring philosophical texts, was very possibly created, and that gap was wide enough to leave the impression of an unbridgeable discontinuity with the past. Indeed, in few other periods of Western philosophy has a determination to dilute if not totally dissolve the difference between philosophy and literature attained a comparable level (a determination, it should be added, that

21. This is a rather controversial point, for which see Rossetti 2004a. For a different approach, see Dixsaut-Brancacci 2002, for instance.

22. Let me also stress how easy it is not to pay heed to the dissolution of several «old» philosophical traditions until one is occupied with Plato or other individualities and does not pay heed to the Socratics as a whole.

23. The colloquial nature of the Socratic dialogue may have efficaciously supported the expansion of the range of potential readers.

was reinforced by a measure of anti-academicism, a wish to reach a wider and less specialized readership, and a preference for intellectual challenge). Science may not have been as affected, but in few other epochs was the impression so widely shared –if only for short periods of time– that people were living at the vanguard of an irreversible evolution in the varieties of philosophical method. Indeed, it seems reasonable to assume that the novelty of the Socratic dialogue was not only a strong presence, but a method of philosophy that was largely perceived, by both authors and readers, as sharply discontinuous with what had come before it.

VI. A SHORT-LIVED SUCCESS? TWO KINDS OF SOCRATIC DIALOGUES

No doubt, the triumph of the dialogue over the treatise was very short-lived. If Antisthenes soon began to write treatises, then at a time when the new formula was fairly well established and therefore no longer a novelty Plato largely replaced the dialogue portraying a Socrates who «behaves as Socrates» with dialogues where the principal speakers (not necessarily «the» philosopher) had doctrines of their to expound. With this change, ample room was granted to positive teachings, but the typical Socrates of other dialogues disappeared. Xenophon, in turn, probably wrote treatises before and after having authored his *Socratica*. Moreover, his *Memorabilia* and *Oeconomicus* show a comparable oscillation between talks and situations actively steered by the philosopher, and whole chapters where Socrates himself becomes a poorly qualified character committed to outlining and supporting doctrines which may possibly stem from Xenophon and have little to do with the historical Socrates.

As for Plato, there is a peculiar ambivalence in the dialogues commonly taken as «late». In a sense they do rediscover or resume the treatise standard, since they encompass something remarkably similar to a conventional treatise[24]. This is manifestly the case with the *Timaeus* and the *Laws*, but the *Phaedo* also offers a sustained philosophical doctrine supported by lengthy arguments, and something similar happens in the *Republic*, the *Philebus* and elsewhere. Thus, these and other dialogues of his include sustained points of doctrine that, at least in principle, could have been the subject of a more formal treatise.

However, even in these «doctrinal» dialogues, Plato often shows an interest in pointing out how certain crucial questions *are not* to be taken as having been definitively settled. Notice, for example, how frequently one finds an asymmetry between the main doctrinal body of a given dialogue and its explicit conclusion, which is such as to leave the ques-

24. As to the formal features that qualify this group of dialogues, something has been noted in Rossetti 1996, 329-341.

tion in debate still open in many important ways. Although I cannot enter into details here, this is clearly the case with the *Euthydemus*, the *Cratylus*, the *Republic*[25], the *Theaetetus*, the *Parmenides*, and other non-aporetic dialogues, not to speak of the unexpected (and in a sense disappointing) conclusions of such dialogues as the *Protagoras*, the *Gorgias*, the *Meno*. As a matter of fact, once one has reached the end of each of these dialogues, it is impossible for a non-indoctrinated reader not to feel a sense of perplexity as to the correspondence between what the dialogue has encouraged him to expect and what it positively offers towards its end. Such an asymmetry is no doubt intentional, and no doubt proves to be disturbing. Let me venture to suggest that this asymmetry can only prevent readers from taking the doctrinal body eventually incorporated into a given dialogue as a final, reliable assessment of the ideas held by the author, i.e., as an oblique *caveat*, which would make it compatible with the offer of substantial bodies of doctrine. Of course, this problem needs to be dealt with more extensively than it can be here: be it enough to propose the idea in passing, while reserving a more detailed discussion of the matter for another occasion. Now, this kind of caveat is such as to give rise to a new kind of 'aporeticy' wich, in turn, is meant to envelope the doctrinal body and dissuade from a full, immediate endorsement of it.

VII. Some concluding remarks

All in all, what we have is a shift or evolution from a period of enthusiasm for the dialogue form marked by the portrayal of a Socrates «behaving as Socrates», to a period marked by prevailing attention not to Socrates as such but to doctrinal bodies incorporated into the dialogues, most often with Socrates as the author's spokesman. Hereby, doctrines once again began to form the «content» of dialogues (in the case of Plato's later dialogues, not without the interaction with a variety of messages functioning as residual, tenacious *caveat*s) in a way comparable with the formula presiding over the treatise form. In other words, whatever the details of this period of history, there was *first* a period of enthusiasm for the dialogue form and a new way of philosophizing, *and then* a new period marked by a prevalent attitude toward incorporating whole bodies of doctrines, theories, *doxai* into the dialogues[26]. While the

25. As to the *Republic*, one could mention the disproportion between the final myth and the main *demonstranda* of the dialogue. Such a loss of balance has been convincingly (though sketchily) dealt with in the parodic *Republic* Book XI recently authored by M. Vegetti (Vegetti 2004).

26. A step further, and doctrines newly began to form the «content» of dialogues as well as of philosophy as such (i.e. by occupying, so to speak, the whole semantic field of «philosophy»).

«first movement» suggests the idea of a breaking of the rules, the second is by contrast likely to evoke the idea of normalization –if not restoration. As a matter of fact, both modalities had their own limits or exceptions: some dialogues of the first kind do offer a positive conclusion or teaching; some of the second (at least certain dialogues authored by Plato) do include what are unmistakeably *caveat*s against the full endorsement of the doctrinal body incorporated therein.

Were we concerned with what was new about these writings, we would have to concentrate on those attempts not to offer sound doctrinal bodies formally endorsed by the author. Both before and after the period in question it was common practice for writers to endorse their opinions, and neither was there any notable attempt to violate such a «rule» in the centuries that followed: this, surely, is of great significance. Therefore, the «earlier» Socratic dialogue –the type where a recognizable Socrates steers the conversation while his interlocutor must face unexpected objections and is therefore portrayed in the act of being made perplexed or even baffled by this informal and benevolent master– irrupted in such a way as to operate a first-order «revolution» in the way philosophy was fashioned and in the very idea of philosophy itself. As an experiment in communication[27] which was marked by a rather precarious point of equilibrium, it is no surprise that its life was relatively short. But its novelty was great, and should be compared with certain widespread features of contemporary philosophy, especially whenever a philosopher cannot or will not be identified as the bearer of a definite doctrine, or when an author stresses how inadequate, inflated and therefore ephemeral certain answers may be if compared with the questions they were meant to address or to refute, or when writers try to explore given theoretical possibilities in an unhurried manner. For these writings, and especially Plato's aporetic dialogues, played a crucial role in paving the way for such a flexible method of addressing philosophical matters, and also in crediting this method as worthy of philosophers.

Unfortunately, this was a very short piece of history. The situation changed rapidly, the identification of philosophy with well-assessed doctrinal bodies became common practice for centuries. Many historians still go to great lengths to identify doctrines held by Socrates, while from Plato's dialogues a considerable number of scholars still feverishly attempt to extract doctrines –i.e. answers– and doctrines alone. But are we sure that Socrates did not invest the most valuable part of his efforts in making people perplexed and therefore interested in a greater understanding of what they were discussing with him? Can we believe that this did not matter as much as the setting up and endorsing of particular points

27. In principle, it is an accident that the Socratic dialogue has been primarily philosophical in character since the communication formula *could* have had a different orientation.

of doctrine? Can we confidently say that, even in his aporetic dialogues, Plato hoped to set up a definite theory only then to somehow conceal it, instead of showing no hurry at all in reaching a conclusion? In other words, are we sure that he did not consciously want to leave certain questions at least partially open? In this case, the door would remain open to acknowledging that Plato sometimes shows more than intellectual sympathy and actually tries to argue and settle certain questions. The only *caveat* would be that he is likely to take his attempts as mere steps towards a better assessment, and therefore may not be prepared to take individual passages as his final word on a certain topic (or that he may want to suggest that, in order to reach a final assessment of the matter, many further points ought to have been dealt with)[28]. And, of course, a comparable search ought to be undertaken with reference to Xenophon and other authors of Socratic dialogues in order to establish, whenever possible, how precisely each of them takes what his Socrates happens to state in individual dialogic units. It is clear that a great deal of scholarly work is likely to be undertaken in order to reach a better assesment of the whole matter as well as of individual dialogues.

28. To adopt a similar attitude is likely to affect the principles of interpretation to a greater degree than the assessment of individual passages, but this is not my concern now.

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