

The *Sokratikoi logoi* as a literary barrier.
Toward the identification of a Standard Socrates through them

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*To Professor Mario Montuori
for his Eightieth Anniversary*

1. Toward a holistic approach to the earlier Socratic literature

We have only a second-hand Socrates, *i.e.* we know him only through a number of indirect sources serving as intermediaries. Among them, a very special role is played by those who, basing themselves upon their personal (and collective) recollections, wrote a lot about him and portrayed him in his talking, or rather: as a living person, as a person in the act of living. Indeed, the *Sokratikoi logoi*¹ have the invaluable vantage point of representing us many times Socrates while behaving approximately as he used to do. As a consequence, we should look at this particular group of mediators with gratitude for what, thanks to them, we come to see, to understand, to guess, or at least to imagine about the philosopher.

But what's about their reliability? For these *logoi* clearly are fictional, with unavoidable room for free inventions on the part of every author, although within the typologies (thus the boundaries) of the literary genre. Hence the old question: is it conceivable to distil such a mix of fidelity and freedom, and come to discern between deceptive elements and genuine traits of the historical Socrates which survive despite the fictional context? How could we prove the reliability of a given portrait of the "true" Socrates, had it been obtained by distillation of a number of *Sokratikoi logoi*?

The prevailing opinion is that research of this kind is not (or is no more) worth being undertaken. Especially in these last decades commentators seemed more and more willing to acknowledge (and to accommodate with) a general failure to single out reliable criteria for capturing the real Socrates starting from his protean appearance in a number of different dialogues, and reach sound conclusions in the field. "The philosophy of Socrates himself, as distinct from his impact on his followers, does not fall within the reach of historical scholarship"², it has been written few years ago. But, according to another scholar, "the Platonic Socrates is a character of great philosophical originality and depth, a philosopher whose views and arguments it is still profitable to discuss and analyze today"³. In other words: according to many philosophers of our times there is, luckily, ample room for a promising scholarly work even if, as historians, we have to acknowledge the impossibil-

ity to come to know who the historical Socrates was. So, why not to put aside the question once for all?

To the prevailing opinion it may be appropriate to object that humans *learn* to analyse, decipher and discern. The art of interpretation does progress and it has already happened once and again that certain elements of a communication unit, after escaping attention or remaining impervious to analysis for a while, then yielded to more apt tools. In the case of Plato's communication techniques and strategies, for example, the scholarly community has only recently begun to find, not without a measure of excitement (and a number of disputes), effective modalities of analysis, and to explore this particular dimension of his dialogues in detail⁴. And since, broadly speaking, the *Sokratikoi logoi* stand to Plato's dialogues as a set to a subset, it is quite reasonable to expect some progress in the study of the whole set as well, although the new modalities of research which are usefully exploited in the study of the subset have not yet been employed in the study of other elements of the larger set, or of the set as such. For what has not yet been done will be done, and progress in the analysis of the bundle of explicit and covert messages, encoding procedures, assumptions, presuppositions, expectations, critical threshold, pragmatic implications, and so on, should prove helpful even in order to break here and there the "literary barrier", and, as a consequence, to overcome at least in part the sceptical attitude of so many scholars of our times regarding the search of the "real" Socrates through the whole of the *Sokratikoi logoi* which have survived one way or the other. Indeed, we can only expect that the area of uncertainty will be narrowed in a significant measure, and some areas of reliability, as well as some areas of unreliability, will be singled out in a convincing manner. In addition, there are also several pieces of evidence of value which have just to be exploited, evidences for whose study no new analytical tool is required. Some of them will be discussed later in this paper.

Nevertheless, and no matter whether the analytical tools employed are new or traditional, there is still too little research on the literary genre⁵ and the season of the *Sokratikoi logoi* as such: no doubt a literary phenomenon and a collective intellectual adventure which marked some decades towards the beginnings of the fourth century B.C. As a matter of fact, the holistic approach to so creative a season is not yet part of the scholarly tradition, and most students still find it obvious to concentrate on individual *logoi*, much as if their belonging to a set of *hundreds* of comparable narrative units could be of no significance.

But it should. Just consider the following: most dialogues were written in the space of few decades and almost only in Athens on the part of ca. a dozen of direct pupils of Socrates who knew each other well; moreover authors often tried to give an idea of approximately the same cultural atmosphere. It follows that not only authors, but also a number of customary readers of the time, were

surely aware that each dialogue was part of a larger set of similar writings of a new kind and, *i.a.*, had to win the comparison with other *Sokratikoi logoi* in order to be appreciated. As a consequence, it is simply certain that the whole has affected the parts since the ideation phase of almost every new *logos*.

On these assumptions, the present paper will adopt a holistic, or systemic, approach to the *Sokratikoi logoi* and try to single out how they, taken as a whole, may have affected the formation of a standard, public and basic image of the philosopher. Sections 2 and 3 will focus on the *Sokratikoi logoi* taken as a collective phenomenon and supply some crucial premises for the following sections, where the formation of a standard portrait of the philosopher will be discussed and, to some extent, qualified from the point of view of historical reliability. This way, some criteria to distinguish between areas where the filter represented by the *logoi* forms an opaque barrier (and therefore remove Socrates from sight), and areas where, quite on the contrary, it is rather transparent (to the point of functioning as an effective aid toward the knowledge of the real, historical Socrates) should emerge.

2. Celebrity

The direct pupils of Socrates involved in the invention and exploitation of the so-called Socratic dialogues – a dozen of people, or slightly more – authored *more than two hundred* works covering a larger number of books and encompassing *more than three hundred* Socratic dialogues (including a number of short or very short dialogic units)⁶. These conjectural figures may surprise, since they are not part of the picture currently given by historians. However, they stem from well-established data. Here are the basic ones:

- Plato and Antisthenes totalised about one hundred titles covering a remarkably larger number of books;
- Xenophon's *Memorabilia* encompass some sixty dialogic units distributed in thirty-nine chapters and four books;
- single works encompassing dozens of short Socratic dialogues (*i.e.* books comparable to Xenophon's *Memorabilia*) were authored, in all likelihood, by Aristippus, Crito, Simias, Glaucon and Simon. Their collections may have totalised, in turn, more than one hundred dialogic units.

Given the sheer proportions reached by the Socratic literature of the period, we can only assume that, during the first decades of the fourth century, the Socratics literally flooded Athens with their writings and, first of all, with their *Sokratikoi logoi*, quite a new kind of writing where an ex-

tempore talk, not necessarily encapsulated within a narration, was meant to arouse ideas of philosophical import and also offer some entertainment⁷.

It is equally easy to infer that only a minority of *logoi* may have been expository, doctrinal dialogues meant to reach a narrow group of learned professionals rather than a general readership, while the majority should have been conceived as portraits of Socrates in action – where the Socratic elenchus (in various forms) often played an important role⁸ – and meant to be meaningful for a larger audience even when they were marked by deep insight and opened new paths for philosophy⁹.

Besides, quantity is an unmistakable symptom of success. It is therefore reasonable to guess that these *logoi*, other than have a strong initial impact, aroused a durable interest among the cultivated public of Athens (and possibly of several other Greek *poleis*).

There is also ample evidence about the strong impact of these *logoi* upon the philosophical community of the time. Just consider that, with very few exceptions, the Greek philosophers active during the fourth century were either Socratics, or followers of a distinguished Socratic philosopher, or followers of a distinguished pupil of Plato, so that, during that period, almost no philosopher remained wholly unaffected by some version of Socraticism: when the Socratics literally flooded Athens with their writings, the puzzling dissolution of almost every form of non-Socratic philosophy seems to have taken place¹⁰.

The figures given above are also such as to suggest that for a long period, perhaps a couple of decades, a new *logos* was published every two months or so¹¹. It follows that a quick establishment of the literary genre, with a number of recurrent features for every new title in the series¹², and a clearly identifiable group of Socratic writers, has to be postulated. This, in turn, implies that for most authors it may well have been important to ensure that every new dialogue could be easily acknowledged as a genuine *Sokratikos logos*, and often as a new title in the same series. Besides, the affiliation to the group (I mean a virtual group, for no evidence suggests its institutionalisation as an association or club) clearly was behind the choice, made by a large majority of these authors¹³, to write only *Sokratikoi logoi* for a whole life. In all likelihood, some competition between the members of this group as true heirs of Socrates, as authors of the most faithful recollections, as gifted writers, as great philosophers (and so on), took place¹⁴, and this is further evidence not only of a sense of belonging, but also of the objective importance attained by the group as such. It follows that, in all likelihood, most contemporary readers too had rather definite expectations about these writings, were prepared to read every new dialogue in the light of the previous ones, and *a fortiori* had no doubt about the belonging of their authors to a well-identified group.

Let me now open a parenthesis. There is an unexpected, and almost direct, evidence of how the inexhaustible literary activity of the Socratics was perceived in Athens outside the circle. It is unintentionally supplied by Lysias, and is worth being discussed at some length.¹⁵

The relevant passage is part of a fragment preserved by Athenaeus¹⁶ and belonging to a logographic oration whose authenticity is almost beyond doubt. Lysias is writing on behalf of a banker seemingly prosecuted by Aeschines of Sphettus, one of the Socratics. According to the banker, the plaintiff had previously obtained a loan from him but then failed to pay it back and, for this reason, was already condemned in absentia by a regular jury; but then roles have been inverted and now it is the Socratic writer who prosecutes his banker, although because of the same loan¹⁷. So the story would have begun when the banker, though being aware that Aeschines' finances were already in a very precarious state, still relied on him and lent money. On these premises the banker (or, if you want, Lysias on his behalf) wishes to explain why he had trusted Aeschines nevertheless: that happened, he says, because he firmly believed that, "as he had been a disciple of Socrates and had been giving many solemn lectures on justice and virtue, he would never undertake or venture upon those acts which only the most depraved and dishonest men undertake to practice"¹⁸. So, the banker could claim (no matter whether truly or falsely) that he granted his loan basically because at the time the prestige of Aeschines as a Socratic – thus the public prestige of the Socratics as a group¹⁹ – was such that he took it as more than adequate a security. In making this statement, he implicitly assumes that the average juror (thus the average Athenian citizen) wouldn't find anomalous for a banker (not exactly an intellectual) to know the Socratics, their widespread prestige, their *logoi* and even certain recurrent topics of these *logoi*, nor to trust some of them because of the prestige of the group. In other words, the logographer assumes that the jury would have shared the basic reasoning of the banker, namely that, at least for some time in the recent past, the Socratics (not just Aeschines of Sphettus) really enjoyed an extremely good – and a widespread – repute in Athens, mainly because of their *logoi*.

This is confirmed by Lysias' choice to speak of *logoi peri dikaiosunes kai aretes* and to qualify these *logoi* as *semnoi* ("highly revered"). The details given about the topics most often dealt with are clearly at odds with what we know of Aeschines' dialogues, while they are no doubt apt to give a rough idea of the themes which were, indeed, often treated by different Socratics in their *logoi*. And it is with reference to the whole that they are called *semnoi*. Now *semnos* is a very solemn word, related first of all to the gods and, only by extension, to the most revered human things. Therefore, to say that Aeschines was known for the set of "highly revered" *logoi* he (authored and) used to read or utter, is to suggest that the whole group enjoyed more than good repute: rather a high prestige, to the point of being often treated with a sense of genuine deference by a large milieu

of cultivated people. This is something more than we could have reasonably expected. Nor is there any room for suspecting an exaggeration or antiphrastic overtone in all that, since it was upon this qualification that the banker claims to have granted the loan to Aeschines, and it would have been counter-productive for him to appear a rather credulous man. Lysias, in turn, ought to believe that *in all likelihood* the jury could take the idea of a great prestige of the Socratics for largely acceptable because, otherwise, so emphatic a qualification would have been counter-productive. It follows that, whichever the subsequent misdeeds on both parts, the loan took place because at the time the *Sokratikoi logoi* and their authors really enjoyed an enormous prestige.

Thanks to this occasional statement, we therefore learn from Lysias that the Socratics formed a well-identified group, known for their *logoi*, and also that there has been a period where they enjoyed a very considerable reputation. So, his words carry an unsuspected importance²⁰ as evidence of a spectacular success of the *Sokratikoi logoi* at least for some time after the death of Socrates and before the death of Lysias (thus approximately before 380 B.C.).

3. Recognizability. The formation of a literary identity for Socrates

Prestige and celebrity mean easy recognizability. At the time of their massive authoring, it should have been very easy to recognize a *Sokratikos logos* at first sight: *pace* Gigon²¹, at the time there was no other series of dialogues centred on just one central character and, therefore, comparable to the set of the Socratic dialogues, and in any case the *Sokratikoi logoi* represented a first-order innovation with respect to every literary model available at the time. Just consider how easily perceptible may have been the difference from the books authored by other philosophers in the past, when every text was clearly meant to be the official record of its author's theories (and teachings), theories were openly professed and argued for, and the readers' primary task consisted in concentrating upon the propositional contents of each book (so as to learn – *i.e.* to come to establish – that “according to X, *a* is *b*”). In comparison, the Socratic dialogues were first of all literature, and readers couldn't expect to meet openly endorsed theories, but had to look for the “lesson” the author supposedly wanted to convey (a search which not seldom could remain without a firm outcome²²).

Secondly, especially in the first period, authors were surely expected to outline a Socrates playing in character and, no doubt, they did their best in order to meet such an expectation. Thirdly, every reader had to do his/her best not just in order to assign individual sentences to different characters²³, but also in order to distinguish between genuine imitation and pure fiction, between the “real” Socrates and the trace of the author's personality and beliefs, between entertainment and philosophy. Besides, readers had to meet a number of other difficult questions: *i.a.* to decide who is

right and whether Socrates is fair with his interlocutor, to imagine how the interaction of somebody with Socrates will evolve, to experience changes in the emotional identification²⁴, and to wonder which is the real lesson of the dialogue. As a consequence, a Socratic dialogue requested from every reader an hermeneutical activity *incomparably greater* than a typical fifth century philosophical treatise. This is surely something unique for the period.

For these and other reasons, to write a new *Sokratikos logos* was to devise and set up something new within a highly characterised formula, probably something more complicated than a contemporary tragedy or comedy. Besides, short *logoi* too had to follow a number of binding (though virtual) guidelines in order to be acknowledged as genuine new Socratic dialogues. Therefore, for most readers, it should have been normal to form a very definite idea not only of the typical *Sokratikos logos*, but also of the Socrates playing in character and of the kind of situation (atmosphere, mood) the philosopher used to set up when he was actively engaged in a talk. There is enough, I would surmise, for assuming that a whole macro-rhetorical strategy²⁵ was visibly at work in a very large majority of dialogues, apt to be recognised, and therefore apt to remain unaffected by the *logoi* (e.g., certain expository or doctrinal dialogues) where Socrates changed beyond recognition.

It follows that the Socrates portrayed – and even exploited – by these writers was not really subject to the discretion of each author. The Socratic writers who, at the beginning of their lucky literary and philosophical adventure, discovered a suitable way of making their Socrates live again (i.e., as involved in plausible conversations, as behaving according to his well-established habits), can only have been aware of the crucial importance of adhering to their shared recollections, granting their hero a maximum of recognizability and also making his behaviour understandable (other than admirable) whichever the fictional elements and other characteristics of each narrative unit. (Something similar happens with caricaturists and comic writers, who dare to alter certain features of a well-known person only insofar as they may reasonably expect that people will be equally able to recognize at first sight the butt of the satire, otherwise the comic deformation could no more provoke laughter.)

This way, a fictional Socrates – a Socrates duly accommodated to recurrent fictional requirements – happened to take shape and his *literary identity* to be somehow blocked and maintained from dialogue to dialogue, much as if it were his true identity. Thus, the frequent publication of new *Sokratikoi logoi* should have affected the image of the philosopher in the most powerful manner by superimposing a recurrent, filtered, literary identity over the collective memory of the man who physically lived in Athens and was actually executed in the spring of 399 B.C. It is easy to imagine, indeed, the possibility for the conventional image of Socrates to prevail even over certain traits well-preserved in the memory of those who knew him by personal acquaintance. All that, of

course, because of the success of the formula, a success which surely²⁶ had the power of establishing a silent agreement among both authors and a wider number of readers about what would correspond (and what wouldn't) to the "real" Socrates.

In order to outline different phases in this complex process of continuous modification of some elements of the whole, and sedimentation of a number of almost unchanging features, we should probably mention, first, the choices made once for all by the authors of the very first dialogic units, the ensuing establishment of a standard, the remarkable success the most ancient *logoi* have probably met, and then a period of some years during which, once established the literary genre, certain basic features were largely maintained. Subsequently, a third phase occurred, when a certain saturation arose, and authors began to feel themselves more or less free to deviate from the standard *Sokratikos logos* and the standard portrait of the philosopher²⁷. In all likelihood, readers were not shocked, first of all because a basic identity of Socrates was already available to every author and reader, and secondly because, at least after several years, the average reader too may well have been less interested in the umpteenth dialogue where the philosopher behaved as usually than in rather unconventional new *logoi*.

4. The Socrates that we too know rather well

On these premises it may be tempting to infer, with Gigon, that the *Sokratikoi logoi* were mere "Dichtung" and therefore unsuitable to serve as fiction as well as documents, *i.e.* not only as entertainment but also as sources of information. However, this would be, no doubt, an oversimplification since, given the context, the argument could be easily reversed. Just consider that, generally speaking, fiction is the *only* way of portraying somebody as a person still alive and able to behave in character. Moreover, it is beyond doubt that, at least toward the beginnings of their adventure as writers, the Socratic authors did their best to give a plausible idea of what the real Socrates had been, and surely the success of these dialogues had something to do with their average faithfulness to the real Socrates they had previously experienced as a teacher, leader, and distinguished friend. As a matter of fact, when the Socratics began to write these *logoi*, they were engaged in the most serious attempt to rehabilitate the repute of a beloved man and to shield the repute (and the future) of the Socratic way of philosophising, and thereby to grant a future (thus a prestige, a role in the society) to themselves as *the* "new philosophers". So, the portrayal of Socrates-as-a-living-person-behaving-as-he-used-to does have a documentary value.

It may be helpful, in this context, to mention what happened in the Latin area during the Middle Ages, when it became impossible to have access to any Socratic dialogue, and what hap-

pened in the Italian Quattrocento once Leonardo Bruni had translated into Latin a number of Plato's dialogues including the *Apology*, the *Crito*, the *Phaedo* and the *Meno*. When many generations of learned people lost the access to any *Sokratikos logos*, the image of Socrates reduced itself to a poor mix of few maxims, *doxai* and anecdotes. On the contrary, when at least some *Sokratikoi logoi* reappeared, the philosopher immediately came back to live, so to speak, and a rather definite personality newly became visible behind the maxims, the *doxai* and the anecdotes ascribed to this man by a variety of ancient texts. This was a significant event²⁸. It helps us understand how powerful and universal is the conditioning originated by the fact of having access to a number of Socratic dialogues. For us too, Socrates is first of all that of the dialogues.

Let me add that Socrates enjoys a rather stable identity (I mean a *basic* identity), and that even among us regardless of our level of familiarity with the dialogues. This is an experience that I presume to be universal, for scholarly disputes hardly affect the basic identity of the philosopher: his way of dominating the dialogue, his way of surprising and baffling others, his unfailingly benevolent attitude even if certain refutations of his could be severe, his idiosyncrasies... As it happens, this kind of basic identity is the same that emerges from most dialogues as *the* literary identity of Socrates.

Luckily, during the XX century the scholarly community has experienced something relevant and possibly enlightening: the discovery of new portions of the *Sokratikoi logoi* authored by Aeschines of Sphettus and preserved by some Oxyrhynchus papyri. Apparently nobody has access to these fragments without having previously read a number of Socratic dialogues at least in translation, thus without having previously elaborated the standard, basic, literary image of the philosopher, and no scholar has so far shown the least perplexity in acknowledging that what emerges from the available portions of his dialogues is *the same* Socrates we already presume to know despite the uniqueness of each dialogic unit. Besides, almost the same happens with a large portion of anecdotes and apophthegms we discover here and there in writings of the Imperial period: in them too we often find a person already known to us (this is the case esp. when exchanges can be traced back to an ancient *Sokratikos logos* which is no more directly available to us²⁹). Conversely, when we read a dialogue developing according to different guidelines, for instance with a Socrates who wants to learn from his interlocutor, rather than to question him, and is satisfied with the answers the latter has to offer (as it happens in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*), it is quite natural for most readers to react with a sense of surprise and suspect a serious deviation from reality.

In conclusion: the Socrates we know rather well is that of the (majority of the) *Sokratikoi logoi*, while every other element has to compete with this basic identity because it is here that we meet many times the same "living" person. It is, therefore, simply inconceivable to ignore such a

filter, and a holistic approach to the dialogues recommends itself since, no matter how we came to form an idea of the whole, it will surely affect our immediate expectations (“Socrates should be so-and-so, and should behave more or less this way”), and therefore our way of perceiving and understanding every other source of information about him.

However, there remains the task to understand how the “literary barrier” can or should be treated in order to make of it a help instead of a hindrance. Assuming that we have to do with an almost ubiquitous and thick “literary barrier”, it remains to establish at which conditions we can expect the *Sokratikoi logoi* to yield reliable pieces of information despite their fictional nature.

5. Making holes through the literary barrier. An example to begin with

Detective novels show that evidences can be extracted from almost everywhere and with the most unexpected tools. Indeed, no safe methodology for the “distillation” of the Socratic literature is or will be available. We can only rely on the possibility of making individual “holes” here and there. So, let us begin with a rather promising move, based on the certain *logoi* (authored by Xenophon, Aeschines and Plato) which have the privilege of giving us not just the umpteenth portrait of Socrates, but the portrait of some imitators of the philosopher, *i.e.* of people trying to behave *à la Socrate*. When authors dare to portray a situation of this kind, we’re authorised to assume that they expect readers (or at least most readers) to be aware of the imitation, and able to discover in the imitation some traits, if not of the real Socrates, at least of a good literary substitute of him. It follows that the possibility of identifying what both authors and the general readership of the period took for a basically reliable imitation in these passages, is open for us too.

The most obvious candidate is Xen. *Mem.* III 8. In this dialogic unit Xenophon begins by telling us that once Aristippus tried to refute Socrates in the same way he had been previously refuted by the philosopher (§ 1). His idea was: “I’ll ask him whether he knows something which is good, and whichever good thing will he mention, I’ll show him that, under certain conditions, that thing proves to be bad”. In other words, he relied upon the possibility of devising undisputable counter-examples whichever the good thing mentioned by Socrates, or upon his ability to prepare a counter-move whichever the first answer given by Socrates (§ 2). But, worse for him, Socrates’ choice was wrong-footing, for he immediately counter-asked: “Something good? Ahem, good for what? For example good for the fever? Or, maybe, good for ophthalmy?”. The wrong-footed Aristippus could only answer: “Not for the fever”, “Not for ophthalmy”, and so on. So Socrates could brusquely dispose of him by commenting: “if what you want to know is whether I know something good, but good for nothing, well, I don’t know anything of the kind, and don’t want to

know!” (§ 3). For the sake of brevity I’ll pass over the further developments of the interchange between the master and Aristippus. However this is enough to infer that here Aristippus – and *a fortiori* Xenophon – is consciously and unmistakably trying to reproduce quite a typical Socratic strategy. Therefore, this way we come to establish what, according to Xenophon, his readers could take for a convincing imitation of questions the historical Socrates used to ask to his interlocutors.

Something comparable comes from Aeschines’ *Aspasia*. In the famous passage quoted by Cicero³⁰ Socrates re-creates an exchange between Aspasia and a newly-wed couple where the cultivated *hetaira* prepares a severe (though benevolent) conversational trap, and the couple, as expected, falls. This is a highly disciplined exchange, marked by a pseudo-analogical modality³¹.

In both cases the modern reader too is likely to notice at once something already familiar to him. If so, this would be the best proof of the high degree of recognizability which characterizes these two imitations of a typical Socratic behaviour. What is more, both authors clearly expect us to realise that Aristippus as well as Aspasia are imitating Socrates in a recognizable manner. Therefore it is not a matter of mere chance if even in our times a dialogue marked by an elenctic (or aporetic) strategy is so easy to recognize: we meet here a credible imitation of the Socrates who liked to put (and was so able in putting) others in difficulty. And since there are plenty of passages where he is portrayed as trying to put others in difficulty, we infer that, thanks to these imitations (and especially the first one), it is nearly certain that the historical Socrates – not just the conventional, literary one – was indeed accustomed to behave approximately this way.

Let us consider now a passage from Plato’s *Gorgias* (447c-448a). Here we find Socrates who, having heard that Gorgias will accept any question, dares to say, quite abruptly, to Chaerephon: “Well, ask him!”. As one would expect, Chaerephon comments: “Ask... Hem... But what should I ask him?”. Contrary to normal expectations, Socrates remains reticent: “Ask him who is he” (and we’re expected to imagine Chaerephon’s amazement in face of such an answer: not unlike Socrates, he knows quite well who Gorgias is). Then he continues: “Suppose he is a craftsman of shoes. His answer should be that he is shoemaker. Or don’t you realise how I am speaking?” (implicit: “It is hardly credible that you fail to grasp immediately what I have in mind; you know me so well...”) And Chaerephon: “Oh, now I get it. I’ll ask. – Tell me, Gorgias, etc.”³². Most commentators have absolutely nothing to say about this passage, but the theatrical nature of this *a parte* between Socrates and his long-term friend should be immediately clear. No less easy to guess should be Plato’s expectation that most readers would recognize at first sight a typical Socratic strategy adopted by somebody else in a rather competent way (and enjoy seeing it).

As a matter of fact, such a strategy³³ is absolutely transparent. The philosopher devises the possibility of catching Gorgias in one of his favourite traps and wants Chaerephon to take the initia-

tive (instead of himself, in order to diminish the risk that Gorgias gets the message and, at least, becomes immediately suspicious). To this effect he must address to Chaerephon an encoded message suitable to pass unnoticed to bystanders, and correctly assumes that only the addressee, Chaerephon (who is so well acquainted with the most beloved conversational strategies of his famous friend), should be able to grasp the true though covert meaning of his encoded sentence(s), while he expects that to the eyes of every other person gathered there the encoded sentence(s) will pass for something trite and unimportant. For the joy of readers, Plato portrays Chaerephon as unable to decode Socrates' very first input. The philosopher must therefore be more clear but, once more, clear only to the eyes of Chaerephon. To this effect he omits the question he believes Chaerephon should address to Gorgias and gives the answer to a standard question to be identified by inference, a question whose concern, in any case, has nothing to do with the Sophists but mirrors Socrates' well-known preference for certain rather trivial analogies. In other words, Chaerephon is expected to trace the question lying behind a certain kind of answer. However Socrates adds as a precaution: "Do you understand how am talking to you, *i.e.* that this is an encoded message? you should!" Alerted this way, Chaerephon comes to decode the message in due manner and then, when he has come to form a clear idea of what Socrates expects him to do, he unhesitatingly addresses to Gorgias a clearly standardized question which perfectly adheres to the first message launched to him by the philosopher.

So this time too, one of Socrates' typical (and therefore recognizable, knowable, reproducible) ways of shaping (it is tempting to say, rather: "formatting") the interaction with other people, happens to be reproduced, and we're informed about what could mean to behave in the Socratic manner.

Thus three passages³⁴, coming from three different authors and occurring in wholly different contexts, display an important similarity with some favourite Socratic strategies. Every author wants to draw his readers' attention to an unmistakable Socratic strategy or modality, and we have to do with *the same* penchant for the cat-and-mouse play. So, three different imitations by three different authors, with the complex encoding modalities marking each passage, are meant to evoke the same behaviour and treat it as a genuinely Socratic one. Besides, it is absolutely clear that the kind of behaviour which, according to the passages commented above, pupils and friends sometimes tried to imitate, is the same that happens to be portrayed many times by a number of other *Sokratikoi logoi*. Moreover, it is the same that happens to be mentioned with great emphasis in Plato's *Apology* (notably at 23c and 39cd).

Several inferences follow.

- (1) From the passages discussed above we learn that, when a number of *Sokratikoi logoi* portray the philosopher as a wise questioner able to devise the kind of answer he will elicit from his inter-

locutor by means of well-conceived questions (and backing remarks), such a portrayal is really meant to capture some typical features of the standard, conventional, literary – and thus, in a sense, real – Socrates, since this feature happens to be repeatedly imitated. So we can rely upon a second-order portrayal (a meta-portrayal) hinting at the typical behaviour outlined in a number of first-order portrayals.

- (2) The customary prejudice of the Socratics in favour of the philosopher does not affect what we have to do with here. This an additional first-order credential. Therefore it is on very good grounds that we claim to have made a veritable hole in the literary barrier (or, if you prefer, to have discovered a point where the barrier happens to become transparent).
- (3) Moreover, if we consider how often the Socratics have represented their master in the act of preparing a conversational trap for his interlocutors and playing a cat-and-mouse game with them, a powerful evidence does emerge against the (nowadays rather widespread) presumption that “insuperable contradictions” affect the Socrates portrayed by different Socratics.
- (4) This way, we come to acknowledge the basic reliability of an unmistakable behaviour recurring many times in the *Sokratikoi logoi*, and therefore we come to learn that, at least in the last period of his life, Socrates – the historical Socrates – really enjoyed the cat-and-mouse play with his interlocutors, and was unsurpassable in this kind of dialectic. This is more than a minor hole in the literary barrier.

6. Toward the identification of a Standard Socrates

If so, the route is open for further holes. The crucial step is the possibility of establishing whether authors are following the standard, conventional, literary (and thus, in a sense, reliable) portrait of Socrates – hereafter: the Standard Socrates – or are deliberately deviating from it. There is a very promising avenue to this goal.

In our search for the constants and variables that emerge from the whole set of the *Sokratikoi logoi* (and related documents)³⁵, let us now undertake a reversal of the previous enquiry upon people trying to behave *à la Socrate*, and try to identify at least some situations (and passages) where Socrates is nothing more than a character, to the point that, had his name been replaced by another name, no special sense of surprise would probably have arisen among readers and commentators.

That is the case whenever we meet a character named “Socrates” who, instead of behaving as, broadly speaking, a questioner and a person who inclines to put others in difficulty (although only for a while and within an overall benevolent attitude), becomes, rather, a professor having a lot

of already well-structured theories of his own to expound (as, for example, in substantial portions of Plato's *Phaedo*), or a professor wanting to be followed by a very disciplined interlocutor who does not dare to have ideas of his own but only tries to understand him step by step (as, for example, in Plato's *Republic*, though with the exception of Book I), or somebody who quietly accepts³⁶ to learn a lot from his interlocutor (as in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*), or a good knower of the abilities needed to be a clever *hipparchos* (as in *Mem.* III 3), or a good knower of how painters come to reveal emotions and *ethos* through the lineaments, and sculptors to portray the human body as a living one (as in *Mem.* III 10.1-8). *This* Socrates surely has very little in common with the Standard Socrates and, most importantly, is not likely to be taken as such. With reference to this kind of dialogues it is, therefore, proper to say that, if and when a person wanting to expound theories of his own enters, the Standard Socrates immediately exits from the scene.

As a matter of fact, no *Sokratikos logos* (nor a different ancient source) known to us ever attempts to portray an imitator of Socrates who affects to make a monologue, has a lot of theories of his own to expound, or even quietly accepts to learn from his interlocutor. Besides, the dislike for the mere transfer of ready-made knowledge and the quest for alternative modalities of communication and interaction on the part of the Standard Socrates – this is, indeed, part of the Socratic heritage – is largely incompatible with the practice of presenting whole doctrinal bodies which have been already well-structured, as well as with a Socrates who has practically nothing *to do with* his interlocutor³⁷. It is therefore quite likely that ancient authors, when portraying Socrates this way³⁸, were consciously deviating from the Standard Socrates. And most readers, in turn, may have easily realised that sometimes authors were preserving the formal, nominal identity of the character but not much more than that, thus without any serious claim to ascribe to the historical Socrates the doctrines they were putting at the centre of a given dialogue. Besides, we too reason this way! So, though framed in a Socratic setting, those doctrines were meant to be perceived – and were perceived, and *are* perceived – not as Socratic stuff but as ideas dear to individual authors. In comparison with the strong identity of the Standard Socrates, the identity of the Socrates sometimes behaving as a “professor” (and so on, as specified above) can only be treated as quite weak.

In order to drive this point home, we should look for border-line cases, and the so-called *logos protreptikos* may well be a case in point, since it is clearly rooted in the behaviour of the Standard Socrates but, at the same time, is suitable to be treated as a teaching, thus as a doctrine (indeed, an highly representative Socratic doctrine). Put this way, the *logos protreptikos* may be used as a warning against the idea that, *as a rule*, if and when a person wanting to expound theories of his own enters, the Standard Socrates immediately exits from the scene. This would be a hasty generalization, one could argue, because it is not compatible with the *logos protreptikos* and it is far from

sure that this is the only exception to the supposed rule. – But the *logos protreptikos* should not be taken for a formal teaching. For once reduced to a mere group of statements suitable to be acknowledged as true or false, most of its value gets lost. It becomes a powerful message only if it is part of a whole interactive strategy, aimed at taking the interlocutor by surprise, at arousing a measure of shame, and at leading him to envisage a radical change in his everyday behaviour. Besides, the well-known “Socratic paradoxes” too have something to do with the Standard Socrates only insofar as they remain tools (or weapons) in the hands of the philosopher in order to affect other people’s behaviour. On the contrary, if and when the “Socratic paradoxes” become theories, statements suitable to be universally valid, or statements subject to a process of refinement, they become quite another thing, something only remotely linked to the Standard Socrates. Socrates, in turn, becomes the name of an intellectual who endorses/d a given theory and slightly or nothing more – surely no more the Standard Socrates.

Thus, by paying heed to what gets lost when Socrates behaves only as a character, we come to capture an identifying mark of the Standard Socrates: he is a man who does things with words and aims at affecting not just the opinions but also the behaviour of his interlocutors (with analogies, examples, counter-examples, arguments...). Socrates “has to be” pragmatically involved in the effort of leading an interlocutor to realise something, possibly through the ridicule, otherwise he no more “is” a living person, nor can he be acknowledged as the Standard Socrates. As a consequence, if and when there is no play, no interaction with an interlocutor, he gets lost. It follows that, when a Socratic writer portrayed the philosopher as... another person (as a professor, as the mere bearer of certain theories, or so), he could hardly claim (and mean) to offer a reliable picture.

As to certain theories most often ascribed to Socrates – for example the absolute duty to keep the obligations toward the city laws, the statements according to which “nobody does voluntarily the wrong” and “virtue is knowledge”, the denial of *akrasia*, eventually the “Pauline predication” and the “self-predication” – it remains to ascertain whether we’re really entitled to ascribe them to the real Socrates. Besides, for the reasons outlined above (paragraph 3), it is far from sure that “the philosophy of Socrates” can really be reduced to a small set of sentences: whenever the Standard Socrates came on the scene, there was room for intuitions, values, and very typical pragmatic strategies, certainly not for a small group of statements to be formally endorsed. So, what if the philosophy of Socrates were to be reconsidered, and the non-propositional features of his teaching to receive a much greater attention?³⁹

Let us conclude, then, that, in this way, the Standard Socrates becomes something rather well-identified, and reasonably close to reality. The historical Socrates may well have been very similar to the Standard one. Of course, we have to limit the correspondence between them on differ-

ent grounds, for example by assuming that the *logoi* mirrored only the Socrates of his last years and surely emphasized some of his best qualities. But we have seen that to take these limits into account is just a way of making holes in the literary barrier. Besides, the firm identity of the Standard Socrates amounts to a first-order challenge with respect to current ways of facing the so-called Socratic Question. Moreover, to come to establish that the Standard Socrates is biased from a given point of view, or that a given feature should be very near to reality, is something very promising since this way holes drive us not just toward the Standard Socrates, but beyond (or behind) it, thus very near the real, historical Socrates.

Abstract

My first contention is that Plato and the other pupils of Socrates who have authored Socratic dialogues should be put against the collective phenomenon of the Socratic literature of the period more systematically than is usually done. It should be enough to consider how impressive was the quantity of *Sokratikoi logoi* published within less than half a century for realising that the perception of the whole should have largely affected the perception of individual *logoi*. Whence the legitimacy (and the need) of a holistic approach to all these writings.

Moreover, a well-characterized portrait of Socrates emerges this way: a Socrates who is practically the same from dialogue to dialogue, and who happens to be imitated (as in Xen. *Mem.* III 8 and elsewhere) as well as put aside whenever he is treated, rather, as the bearer of definite points of doctrine. It will be argued that, once identified such a “Standard Socrates”, the otherwise thick “literary barrier” represented by the dialogues becomes remarkably transparent, suitable to be crossed and therefore to bring us very near the real, historical Socrates.

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[Footnotes]

¹ These writings are commonly referred to as *Sokratikoi logoi*, basically because Aristotle labelled them this way in a passage of his *Rhetoric* (II 20, 1393b3).

² Kahn 1992, 240.

³ Santas 1979, x.

⁴ The following collections of articles can give an idea of the “revolution” which is presently affecting Plato studies: C. L. Griswold (ed.), *Platonic Writings Platonic Readings* (New York-London 1988); J. C. Klagge-N. D. Smith (eds.), *Methods of Interpreting Plato and His Dialogues* (Oxford 1992); G. A. Press (ed.), *Plato’s Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations* (Lanham MD 1993); F. J. Gonzales (ed.), *The Third Way. New Directions in Platonic Studies* (Lanham MD 1995); R. Hart-V. Tejera (eds.), *Plato’s Dialogues. The Dialogical Approach* (Lewinston NH 1997); G. A. Press (ed.), *Who Speaks for Plato? Studies in Platonic Anonymity* (Lanham MD 2000); G. Casertano (ed.), *La struttura del dialogo platonico* (Napoli 2000); F. Cossutta-M. Narcy (eds.), *La forme dialogique chez Platon. Evolution et réceptions* (Grenoble 2001).

⁵ To study the literary genre as such may mean to consider such topics as its origin, creators, recurrent features, champions, evolution and death, fortune, while to adopt a holistic approach to all these writings would mean to take into account the contents too, including such topics as the naturalization of a new approach to philosophy, the constants we may observe as to the “lesson” these *logoi* yield, or as to the portrait of Socrates, and so on.

⁶ For an assessment of the evidences and the arguments leading to these figures see Rossetti 2001a, 13-16.

⁷ To try to account for what precisely was new in this new kind of writing is an almost dramatic experience for, whichever you do, you will probably be harassed by a tenacious impression of not being up to your task. This at least has been (and still is) my own impression even after having dared to say something on the topic in Rossetti 2001a, 22 f., and Rossetti 2001b, 196-200.

⁸ Given the context, it may be enough to recall that the elenctic form affects not only the aporetic dialogues of Plato but (a) a number of chapters in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, (b) Aeschines’ *Alcibiades* and *Aspasia*, (c) a number of later anecdotes whenever a sketchy narrative takes place. (For some recent discussions about the Socratic elenchus see Benson 1995 and Scott 2002.)

⁹ Among Platonists (and not only among the upholders of the primacy of the unwritten doctrines over the written ones) it has often been claimed that even in his “doctrinal” dialogues Plato remains formally and substantially uncommitted to the theories outlined and the arguments advanced, much as if no point of doctrine were properly endorsed by him in these dialogues. However there is little doubt that, in these dialogues, theories and arguments not only receive the greatest at-

tention, but that emphasis is on their reliability, so much so that very little room is left to perplexities, and no room at all to formal objections. On the contrary, in the aporetic dialogues, emphasis is rather on the provisional and doubtful character of what comes to be agreed upon *for a while* by the locutors in the course of their often conflictive ruminations.

¹⁰ As a matter of fact, we know of almost no other book of that period which could be taken as philosophical in character and *unaffected* by Socraticism: Gorgias and Democritus probably wrote most of their works before the beginning of the fourth century; the contribution of Archytas of Tarentum to philosophy remains a matter of mere inference; Isocrates never seriously claimed to be a philosopher nor did he educate a new generation of philosophers, nor did he write a work we can treat as philosophical in character; the author of the Derveni Papyrus was not, nor claimed to be, a philosopher. Or, who else can be taken as representative of other contemporary ways of philosophising? Whence the following, and not less puzzling, question (which I have tried to address in Rossetti 2001a, 31-32, and Rossetti 2001b, 191-195): did the Socratics just occupy the space unexpectedly left free by other philosophical traditions, or were they able to provoke the quick dissolution of almost every unsocratic line of thought? I don't like dilemmas, but this one seems to me a serious challenge for historians.

¹¹ Of course one can only venture tentative estimates; however see Rossetti 2001a, 17 f. (where I may have been exceedingly optimistic when speaking of a new *logos* every month) for some comments on this particular point.

¹² The notion of series is much more than a mere metaphor: at least six authors out of a dozen, namely Xenophon, Aristippus, Crito, Simias, Glaucon and Simon, authored each a collection of short *logoi* (*apommenoneumata*, *memorabilia*); Plato, in turn, authored a series of aporetic dialogues clearly meant to be acknowledged as belonging to the same type, and the dialogues forming his first tetralogy were in all likelihood meant to be acknowledged as a series. Moreover, several dialogues written by various authors bear the same title, e.g. *Alcibiades*, *Symposium*, *On the Soul*, *On the Courage*, *On the God(s)*, *On the Law(s)*, *On the Beauty*, and so on. Moreover, we have to postulate some degree of diversification since the very first dialogues or so, and also the constitution of more than one type of Socratic dialogue.

¹³ Antisthenes and Xenophon are the most notable exceptions; third comes Aristippus (Diog. Laert. II 83); as to Plato it is unclear whether the *Apology*, the *Letters* and the absence of Socrates from some later dialogues are enough for ranging him among those who felt themselves free to abandon the literary genre on definite occasions.

¹⁴ A number of reports (sometimes of legends) about the often unfriendly relations among them have been collected during the Hellenistic period by Herodicus and other anti-Platonic writers. See esp. Düring 1942; see also Riginos 1976.

¹⁵ Another passage which in principle should be discussed together with the Lysianic comments on Aeschines and the Socratics is Diog. Laert. II 71, where something is said about the unidentified logographer who once worked for Aristippus. Be it enough, here, a mere remind.

¹⁶ Athen. XIII 612b (fr. 1 Thalheim *or* fr. 38 Gernet-Bizos = *SSR* VI A 16).

¹⁷ According to most commentators it is inconceivable that Aeschines could prosecute the banker who had previously prosecuted him for insolvency and won the lawsuit. But Aeschines was prosecuted and convicted *in absentia*. So, he could well claim that, when the previous trial took place, the banker took advantage of his being abroad for a while in order to conceal to the jury some crucial elements of the disputed loan (whence a prosecution for fraud). I would say that these complications are such as to reinforce the credibility of the story.

¹⁸ The translation by C. Burton Gulick (for the Loeb collection) has been reproduced here.

¹⁹ To be more explicit: because even at an earlier date he knew a lot about the group, not necessarily about this member of the group; in other words: because the prestige of the group taken as a whole was so high that it could be confidently “distributed” among the individuals who formed it even if the banker was not well-acquainted with a certain member.

²⁰ A marginal inference is the following one: this passage by Lysias is enlightening with reference to the legend according to which Anytus was expelled from Athens by the repentant Athenians (Diog. Laert. VI 9-10). So far this story has been universally rejected as a later and meaningless dream of some infatuated admirer of Socrates, but the Lysianic statement is such as to make conceivable not the expulsion but the formation of a certain hostility and the circulation of certain rumours among the cultivated Athenians of the time. – I came, indeed, to acknowledge some value of the Lysianic statement some 25 years ago (cf. Rossetti 1977, 86), but until recently I couldn’t simply imagine that its value was so great.

²¹ Gigon 1947, 65-68.

²² Gonzalez 1998, 7-10 has some interesting remarks upon the nonpropositional knowledge.

²³ An additional serious problem for almost every reader, indeed, given the writing standards of the time. Only the habitual readers of theatrical texts may have been more prepared to so difficult a task.

²⁴ Plato’s aporetic dialogues, not unlike a number of other Socratic dialogues, are structured in such a way that readers often tend to feel themselves sympathetic with the interlocutor at the beginning, but then unflinchingly become to feel more and more on the same wavelength of Socrates.

²⁵ For a tentative analysis of this strategy in the case of most *Sokratikoi logoi*, see Rossetti 2001c, 175-177.

²⁶ Some readers could ask: “Why surely?”. These are but conjectural (though prudent and sharable, I hope) statements. The EQ (epistemic quotient) of most statements made in this section can only be marked by worrying levels of indetermination. This is unavoidable, although it remains, luckily, some room for the discovery of more reassuring pieces of evidence (see below).

²⁷ I suspect that Plato not only opened the way to this phase, but was the most audacious in his deviations from the typical *Sokratikos logos* of the first period. Of course this is a point unsuitable to be dealt with here, however let me suggest, though in passing, that while the dialogues incorporated in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* often adhere to the standard we’re trying to identify, most Plato’s dialogues (included his aporetic ones) are largely atypical because of the high degree of creativity that marks them. See also § 6 below.

²⁸ No pertinent title presently comes to my mind, and I wonder whether historians did actually pay some attention to it.

²⁹ On this point cf. Rossetti 2000a, 18-21.

³⁰ *De invent.* I 31.51-53 = *SSR* VI A 70.

³¹ More on this point in Rossetti 1984.

³² Tentative translation (with some sentences slightly expanded for the sake of clarity).

³³ The short exchange between Socrates and Chaerephon has been commented *in extenso* in Rossetti 1988. It is a surprise (or a pity, if you prefer) to see how many sentences are needed in order to account in some detail for the splendid subtleties of this paradigmatic passage.

³⁴ There would be another couple of related passages from Plato’s dialogues and worth being taken into account here: Socrates’ self-imitation in the *Hippias Major* and the famous passage on Marsyas in the *Symposium*. For the sake of the present enquiry, it is not necessary to discuss them in detail. – Among the texts which are equally worth being treated as a second degree evidence one could continue by mentioning Plato’s *R.* I 337a, where Thrasymachus speaks of “the customary (*eiouthia*) Socratic irony” and *G.* 491a, where Callicles mentions Socrates’ “endless talks about cobblers and cleaners and cooks and doctors, as though our discussion were about them” (trans. T. Irwin).

³⁵ Let us recall that we are looking for the identifying marks of a person who has been portrayed many times in the act of behaving in generally recognizable manners. In these conditions, we should not look for the occurrence of the same word or sentence in different contexts, but rather for the occurrence of the same way of organising, planning, directing an intercourse. The analogy we

have established in the previous paragraph between passages of three different authors is a good example of that, because it emerges from textual units which couldn't be more different in wording.

³⁶ I mean: far from merely affecting to appreciate what the interlocutor has to say (as, say, in Plato's *Euthyphro*: cf. *Eu.* 6c8-9), here Socrates sincerely accepts to learn, i.e. to participate to the transfer of ready-made pieces of knowledge from his interlocutor to himself.

³⁷ It is indeed astonishing to see how often historians report without the least hesitation both that Socrates was biased against ready-made theories and that he maintained a small number of points of doctrine.

³⁸ But this is only one among many known modalities of deviation from the standard portrait of Socrates. Just consider that Plato's aporetic dialogues too are largely deviating from the standard outlined above.

³⁹ In previous papers (Rossetti 2000a; Rossetti 2000b) I tried to show that Socrates does not lose his interest as a philosopher if we put aside a number of doctrines doubtfully ascribed to him. However the possibility to ascribe one or more points of doctrine to the historical Socrates remains, of course, although on different grounds (irrespective of the evidence supporting the identification of the Standard Socrates). I do not dare to tackle so complicate a question here.