



Plato, the Athenian Stranger

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Socrate, l'âme de volonté et de pensée de Socrate, vivait encore pour Platon. Elle vivait en Platon.

A. Diès [1](#)

When does Plato speak for Socrates and when for himself? When is Socrates being accurately represented by Plato, if ever? These are perennial puzzles of the dialogues: the "Socratic question."[2](#) By the end of his writing career Plato undoubtedly speaks his own thoughts in his own voice, or at least a voice that is not Socrates'. This would be fairly evident even without the subsidence of Socrates as a character and participant in the dialogues. Conversely, it seems a fair assumption that the earliest dialogues present something much like the real Socrates, an assumption supported by the testimony of Xenophon and Aristotle. It is the great dialogues of the middle period that are most problematic. Here the voices are blended; some Socratic inspiration seems certain, Platonic addition and development just as certain, with no very clear way to distinguish the two, though many attempts have been made to do so. But implied in the "Socratic question" is a perhaps even more interesting "Platonic question." Why is there this extraordinary unity, this remarkable fusion of voices (and minds) in the first [\[End Page 75\]](#) place, which seems to be virtually unparalleled in literary history? And what can it tell us about Plato, the person and his work?

Though Plato was, and was well-known to be, an intimate follower of Socrates, Plato never even appears in any of the dialogues, let alone presents a view in his own person. Why this curious posture of anonymity?[3](#) It makes a certain sense if in the beginning it was Plato's intention simply, or mainly, to memorialize Socrates and his conversations. But such a project did not require the suppression of authorial voice (compare Xenophon); this was a deliberate choice--and highly effective, for Plato succeeds in creating the illusion that we are hearing the very voice of Socrates himself unfiltered by narrative memory. So successful is the illusion, indeed, that it persists into later dialogues where only on reflection do we come to realize that some of the things "Socrates" is saying could hardly have been in the thoughts of the historical Socrates. No one would have known this better than Plato. Why then the pretense? Perhaps it was not a pretense at all, but rather that in seeking to re-present Socrates, Plato became so identified with him, became so immersed in the other's character, as in effect to create a new self, a *fusion de deux êtres*. The "Socrates" that emerges in the middle-period dialogues is the literary representation of that new self, neither Socrates nor Plato but the result of Plato's assimilation of Socrates to his own spirit. A literary creation, yes (though neither *ex nihilo* nor in Plato's own image), but more than that, a transformation of Plato's own psyche that alone made possible his great philosophical achievements. Without Socrates, there would probably still have been a Plato, but very different from the one we know, one more like the unnamed philosophical "strangers" of the late dialogues, where the dissolution of the Plato-Socrates bond becomes increasingly evident.

In the beginning Plato identified himself profoundly with Socrates, or so his brilliant early impersonations suggest. The basis for this identification is not difficult to reconstruct from the image of Socrates he created. For one thing, Socrates is portrayed as a powerfully erotic figure, particularly through the compelling testimony of Alcibiades in the *Symposium*--a man of immense personal force and magnetism, a satyr concealing a god. The word "satyr" connotes not only ugliness but sexual, phallic energy. Socrates was not only an intellectual mesmerizer, a seducer of minds, he [\[End Page 76\]](#) was

also physically powerful, a hardy soldier, one who could endure lightly the harshness of Attic winters, who could outdrink his comrades and without any sleep go about his business the next day fresh and vigorous, a man among men, gentle but formidable, stirring fear, resentment, and envy in a Meletus, and fascination and adoration in a Plato. In the *Symposium* Socrates is virtually the incarnation of Eros the *daimon*, and it seems at least likely that this portrayal reflects some of the erotic attraction Socrates had for the young Plato.

More fundamental, no doubt, would be Socrates' intellectual and ethical attraction. He was an extraordinarily intelligent person and abreast of all the remarkable intellectual developments of his time, but his particular gift was dialectical: he was the consummate cross-examiner, and it is the clever, witty, ironic Socrates that we see in the Socratic dialogues, the Socrates who explodes every theory and deflates every pretension while always protesting his own ignorance. The irony is usually genial but occasionally mordant. He is a sting-ray, as his young friend Meno calls him, a gadfly, as he calls himself, politely but devastatingly calling attention to the absurdity of other people's beliefs. In his disingenuous way, he was a subversive, something that clearly appealed to Plato, who more than once tells us of the attraction dialectical gymnastics had for bright young Athenians of his generation. And even for the not so bright: in the dialogue *Euthydemus*, two brothers, hopeful Sophists, have taken up the eristic game with deplorable results that Plato cleverly satirizes. Socrates himself was more serious about dialectic, though he too saw the fun of it, and even participated in the fun. It was and is an intellectual game that amuses and stimulates. But the great difference between Socrates and the Sophists, who were the principal players and instructors in those days, was, as Plato saw it, that for Socrates it was always a pursuit of truth, never taken up lightly for its own sake, and least of all for money or admiration.

This was only one aspect of the ethical appeal Socrates had for the young Plato. Socrates was a man of integrity who had courageously resisted the lawlessness of the Thirty, yet was obedient in his death to the laws of his beloved Athens, a man kind not only to friends but also to enemies, one who insisted that evil should never be returned for evil, a man in whom there was no arrogance, no boasting, no pretentiousness, no guile. Of course some have doubted his ingenuousness. In his own time and ever since, some have suspected that Socrates' pose of modesty thinly disguises arrogance. The suspicion is exacerbated by his frequent, occasionally heavy-handed, irony that seems sometimes to say, as to Euthyphro, "As I [End Page 77] praise your astuteness and deprecate my own ignorance, we both know that in fact I am intelligent and you are a fool." This is a good example, for the inference is perfectly true and obvious to anyone--except perhaps poor Euthyphro. But that is a significant exception. If Socrates did not suffer fools gladly, at least he suffered them patiently. There is a world of difference between Socrates' mild irony and the brutal invective of the Sophist Thrasymachus in the first book of the *Republic*. No doubt Socrates was aware of his own intellectual superiority--if he was ever unsure of it, he had the testimony of the Delphic Oracle that he was "the wisest man in Greece"--but he was also intelligent enough to know that this particular superiority was nothing to be puffed up about. He knew his own ignorance. To be sure, Socrates was no Uriah Heep; he was nobody's humble servant and never pretended to be. As the *Apology* testifies, he evidently thought very well of himself and what he had done with his life, was even proud of it. But there was nothing haughty about him.

The most extended, intimate, and powerful portrait of Socrates is the eulogy of Alcibiades in the *Symposium*. Let us return to that dialogue at the moment when Socrates has just finished his encomium of Eros, describing, in a famous passage, a mystical journey to a vision of beauty itself, transcending all worldly attractions to beautiful persons. He finishes, and suddenly there is a loud knocking at Agathon's door. We are awakened from the trance Socrates' words have induced. Suddenly we are back in the "real" world. Enter Alcibiades, drunk. Intent on celebrating Agathon's dramatic victory, he does not see Socrates until he is seated. Then there is a playful interchange. What! says Alcibiades, Socrates lying in wait for me again? And Socrates to Agathon: Protect me from this fellow! The good physician Eryximachus explains to Alcibiades that they have been extolling Eros and it is only right that Alcibiades should take his turn. But Alcibiades will praise only Socrates, that Silenus, that Marsyas, that satyr whose words are greater than any divine melodies: "For when I listen, my heart leaps and tears pour out at the words of this man." He is made to feel that his present way of life is not worth living, and "holding my ears hard, as if from the Sirens, I run away, lest I grow old sitting beside him" (215E-16B). He has "looked inside" Socrates and found only divine and golden images of surpassing beauty and virtue.

Plato might also have been an Alcibiades, shutting his ears and running from the siren voice of philosophy to pursue a political career, but he stayed. An implied purpose in this story is surely to

exonerate Socrates from any responsibility for Alcibiades' infamous misdeeds. Had he only [End Page 78] listened to Socrates! That is the clear message, but it is only given in passing. The more important confession is Plato's own, a vindication of his own discipleship. What could he have known, after all, of Alcibiades' true feelings? But he knew his own. And he recognized in them the high place of Eros.

All of this, or something much like it, seems to be how Plato felt about Socrates, "the best and wisest and most righteous man of all we knew," as he is eulogized in the concluding words of the *Phaedo*. These are beautiful words, and appropriately elegiac, looking back to the time of Socrates' death, but they do not suggest the excitement, as it must have been, of the first time Plato met his mentor. At a best guess this probably occurred when Plato was a disillusioned twenty-year-old or thereabouts (a good age for disillusionment): an extremely thoughtful, earnest young man, unhappy with the moral and political life he saw about him. So the *Seventh Letter* testifies. And even if Plato's authorship of the letter is not absolutely certain (most scholars accept it as genuine), what earnest, thoughtful young man of his time would not have been disillusioned by the prevailing moral cynicism? Socrates was nearing sixty, but still strong, active, and energetic, a figure of erotic, intellectual, and moral power. Above all, a man of awesome integrity and genial self-assurance, a man who had no answers but all the right questions, who seemed to have himself and his life in perfect control, seasoned and secure, knowing who he was and what he was doing: a focus of *ressentiment* for the Meletuses of Athens, but a magnet to young men like Plato.

If Plato was at loose spiritual ends, as is likely enough, and if he was the kind of person in need of clear and stable values--and his writings leave little doubt of this--he could hardly not have been vitally attracted to such a man as Socrates. So he became a disciple--to the extent that it makes any sense to say that Socrates could *have* disciples. It was to last only a few years, maybe seven or eight. Plato writes as if he knew Socrates all his life, *both* their lives, but in fact it was not a long time at all. And the end was sudden and devastating. Over fifty years after the event, when Plato himself was nearing eighty, he looks back (in the *Seventh Letter*) at Socrates' execution with still evident outrage and grief. In his writings he rehearsed the events in some of his most deeply felt dialogues, the *Apology*, the *Crito*, and the *Phaedo*, and alluded to them in others. It is almost impossible not to believe that he was profoundly shaken by the death of Socrates.

His account of Socrates' last days in the *Phaedo* may be the most moving thing he ever wrote. But he doesn't tell it himself; he puts it in the [End Page 79] mouth of Phaedo, who mentions that Plato was not there because of illness. This is a casual statement, and perhaps there may be nothing more to it than simply what it says. The relatively mild verb *astheneô* is used, meaning basically to be weak, to lack strength, to be indisposed, rather than the stronger *noseô*, to be really sick. What indisposition could have prevented Plato from joining his friends to be with their beloved master in his last hours? One might suppose that only a serious incapacity could have kept him away at such a time and, if so serious, it might have been specified by Phaedo. But it is said only that "Plato, I think, was ill": *oimai*, "I think"--this is Plato's phrase, not Phaedo's. Why "I think"? Is there some doubt? Is this the best excuse Plato has? Why is he not more forthright? Why not simply "Plato was sick"?

Perhaps the "illness" was simply his inability to face the event. If his feelings for Socrates were as strong as they seemed to be, it would indeed have been very hard to accept an invitation to witness Socrates' death. Who would not recoil from such an affair? Yet Phaedo names some fifteen witnesses to Socrates' death and says there were others besides, and clearly all present were people who loved Socrates (neither his accusers nor "victims" were there to relish the event). Evidently it was the expected thing to do, the right thing. Here at least, it is presented as a strangely beautiful event, however sad. And it is Plato who so represents it, in spite of his no doubt actual absence.

Perhaps, then, Plato was not present at the death of Socrates because he could not face it. He could not face it because he had so identified himself with the older man that *his* death would be his own. One can imagine that it was particularly in those dreadful weeks of Socrates' unexpected trial and execution, when a legal and political absurdity, a bad joke, turned into a real nightmare, that Plato's hero worship began turning into psychic assimilation, that incipient identification gradually crystallized, so that he could say to himself--not in words, but in that language that underlies words--"Socrates isn't going to die. He lives in me. I *am* Socrates." And meaning it not as a pious metaphor, but as a reality.

Eventually, and quite possibly even then, he had faith in the immortality and transmigration of souls, a faith that became an essential part of a rational philosophy (for it was only thus that he could explain, at

least for a long time, how one can understand universals: his doctrine of recollection, *anamnēsis*). In fact he tried to prove it, more than once, and if his arguments did not convince the world, he may yet have convinced himself. Of course it was not logical to suppose that Socrates' soul would [End Page 80] enter the body of an already grown man--metempsychosis never meant that--but this identification with Socrates was not a matter of logic, not even the logic of myth, and I am not suggesting that in the beginning it ever came into Plato's consciousness that he had become Socrates. That would be too alien a notion for his rational intellect to entertain, but not at all strange at the unconceptualized level of feeling.

Becoming Socrates, so to speak, Plato began to turn his great literary gifts into an art of dramatic impersonation. All the early dialogues, whether narrated or presented directly, are something like little plays where the participants speak in their own voices. Even when they are in narrative form, the narrator is Socrates himself. (It is not until the *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, and *Parmenides* that the narrator is someone else.) Plato, then, assumes the voice and persona of Socrates--and both are engaging. Are these early dialogues recollections of conversations at which Plato himself was present? Possibly, but there is no way of knowing. Any number of times we are told of people recalling such conversations as nearly verbatim as possible, sometimes, as in the *Theaetetus*, even taking notes and verifying them with other witnesses; and we hear of people committing to memory speeches (*Phaedrus*) and dialogues (*Parmenides*). That Greece was still very much an oral culture in the fourth century is fairly evident and, as in any oral culture, even an only partially oral one, memorization was fundamental. Apparently everyone could recite reams of poetry, especially Homer's, as well as famous orations. On the other hand, such feats of memorization were based ultimately on written texts and it is not conceivable that impromptu dialogues of the kind Socrates engaged in could have been memorized verbatim on the spot, whatever prodigies of memory may be claimed for an oral culture. The Socratic dialogues are certainly not transcripts, then, although there is no reason why they could not have been largely faithful to both the content and style of the originals, even to the recollection of words and phrases. At the same time, it can hardly be doubted that they were at best reconstructions, and could even be outright fictions.

All this ambiguity is Plato's own doing. If he had really meant to record Socrates' stimulating conversations for posterity, he could easily have said so. This is just what Xenophon did when he wrote his *Recollections* of Socrates. He is always saying, "This is what I heard," or "This is what Hermogenes told me," or "I was there at the time." Although in many cases it is obvious that he was not there at all, his point of view, his pose of faithful reporter, is consistent. There was also the precedent of contemporary [End Page 81] historians. Thucydides was open enough about what he was doing when he retold important speeches, claiming only substantial, not verbatim, accuracy, even when representing the speeches as directly quoted. There was nothing to prevent Plato from doing the same. But he didn't. He chose rather to impersonate Socrates without any explanation or qualification, as if it were Socrates himself speaking. And this was no less a feat than that of prodigious memorization. True, he had the model the great dramatists had provided, but theirs was a significantly different enterprise in the respect that they were consciously writing fiction: what might have been, of course, but only *might* have been. Plato seems to record what was. Unlike Xenophon, he never says anything about his recollections and makes no overt claims to authenticity: he never says, "I was there." In fact there is no author's or reporter's or historian's "I" at all. All the dialogues, early and late, begin abruptly with mere voices out of the blue. Most often we simply hear someone talking conversationally to someone else, and only gradually are the persons identified by name. Uniquely in the *Apology*, we hear a voice addressing the Athenians in a speech and it is a while before we can be sure the speaker is Socrates. In a few dialogues, the first voice we hear is a first-person narrator: "Yesterday evening I returned from the army at Potidaea" (*Charmides*); "I was going from the Academy directly to the Lyceum" (*Lysis*); "I went down yesterday to the Piraeus" (*Republic*). And again it is a while before we know it is Socrates who is speaking, who will then go on to recount an earlier conversation in direct quotation.

I refer now mainly to early dialogues, for the pattern changes with the *Symposium* and *Parmenides* of the middle period and subsequent dialogues of the late period. The exact sequence of dialogues in the early period is perhaps hopelessly indeterminate, but there is general and well-founded agreement on the *group* of dialogues that may be regarded as early, often called "minor" or "aporetic," i.e., inconclusive. In this group, the dialogues are presented in the form of immediate, present realities. They thrust themselves upon us. The voices have no mediation or introduction or qualification. Even when there is a narrator, the narrator is Socrates, speaking in the present tense about events that happened only yesterday. Now this is not story or history or any literary genre then known. It is not even drama, despite some resemblance in form, for it tells no story, it has no plot. The dialogue is a new form and one to be much imitated ever afterwards. Its novelty is its formally implied present actuality: it does not

have the comforting temporal distance of the tale or the spatial distance of the theatre. There is some distance nevertheless. After all, any reader, then [End Page 82] as now, would be aware that in spite of the present tense of the verbs, the speakers were all dead and gone. These are voices from the past. Yet they seem to be unfiltered by anyone's memory or notes, making an even stronger claim to authenticity, the stronger for *not* being claimed overtly. The voices are just there, like some kind of brute fact.

Plato may not have been the first to write Socratic dialogues--there are ancient allusions to, and even a few small fragments of, other dialogues written by other followers of Socrates ⁴ --but there is no doubt that he made the genre uniquely his own. And though it has been imitated endlessly through the ages, it has never really worked in any hands but the master's. This seems to be because for others the dialogue has always been merely a form, and therefore a lifeless form, indeed a tiresome form without characters or drama, whereas for Plato it was full of life. He persuades us that real conversations are taking place among real people in real time.

Plato's literary skill is unsurpassed in his ability to bring a character forcefully into our imagination with only a few words of conversation and a few remarks about appearance. And what a cast! The ubiquitous bright youths of Athens, of course, handsome but modest and deferential, engagingly naive, yet quick and perceptive; but there is also old Cephalus, upright and solid, and Theodorus, the mature, genial mathematician, and his intelligent young pupil Theaetetus, almost as homely as Socrates; there is the asinine Euthyphro, the sinister Callicles, the brutish Thrasymachus, the ridiculous brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, earnest Apollodorus, beguiling Phaedrus, flashy Alcibiades, loving Phaedo--there is no end to these brilliant characterizations. And they are never types. When Charmides blushes and when Thrasymachus blushes--this very human thing--each reveals himself, in opposite ways, as a real person, and we are instantly aware of them as real persons, each with his own life, his own uncertainties, his own worries, his own self image, his own self. Alcibiades for a moment shows us his soul. Such moments recur again and again, often taking us by surprise, as we suddenly realize the humanity of what might have been a mere character.

Above all, there is Socrates himself. Largely because of Plato, no person in Greek antiquity is better known to us. Largely, but not entirely, for it is a particular good fortune, again unparalleled in antiquity, that we also [End Page 83] have Xenophon's recollections of Socrates, which in most essentials correspond to and confirm the Platonic portrait. ⁵ True, Xenophon sometimes makes Socrates out as a kind of fifth-century Ann Landers, giving out practical counsel to the troubled, but this may well have been a (real) side of Socrates that Plato chose not to dwell on, and is in any case not inconsistent with the more philosophical Socrates he did portray. Otherwise, Xenophon's Socrates, allowing for the author's lesser literary talent, is basically much the same as Plato's. The Platonic Socrates, then, is pretty assuredly a real person. Plato and Xenophon have given us a physical description of a strong, hardy, bug-eyed, snub-nosed, stout man in middle age--no model for sculptors certainly. Such descriptions are rare. We have very little idea of what most of his notable contemporaries actually looked like. This portrait is given only incidentally in the course of normal conversation: Socrates does not "sit" for it. More importantly, his character, his personality, is vividly realized in the same indirect way: in the way he talks, the way he interacts with other people, in his wit and charm, his geniality, his irony, his serenity, his eagerness, his self-consciousness, his unselfconsciousness, his modesty, his self-assuredness, his optimism, his cynicism, his cleverness, his love of truth and people, his dedication, his tiresome importunity, his sense of humor, his sense of calling, his playfulness, his seriousness, and always his moral integrity. All this rich human complexity is not portrayed, it is re-presented and impersonated.

This achievement is the more remarkable in that it is a re-creation by Plato of times long past. Quite a few dialogues are more or less explicitly set in a time when Plato would have been a child or not even born yet (*Charmides*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, *Meno*, *Symposium*, *Timaeus*, *Critias*); one, the *Parmenides*, takes place when even Socrates himself was young. In these dialogues Plato introduces casual but often fairly definite hints about when they were supposed to have occurred. In the *Charmides*, for example, Socrates has just returned from the battle of Potidaea, which took place in 432, at least five years before Plato was born. The dialogue has also a kind of nostalgic irony in that Charmides, seen there as a modest, handsome boy, grew up to be one of the hated Thirty Tyrants and was killed in 403. The reconstruction of the dialogue was a daring fiction, and it was a quite early effort of Plato's. So too with the others. [End Page 84]

Consider the *Symposium* again. With its distinctive *mise-en-scène* and its lively exchanges, it is one of the most dramatized dialogues. Yet how distanced and convoluted its presentation. It begins with a voice out of nowhere, speaking to some unidentified persons: "I think I am not unprepared for the things you ask about." In the next sentence, we find that the speaker is named Apollodorus, whom some might recognize as a follower of Socrates (as he himself mentions later on). But we are never to find out to whom he is speaking. He was going up to the city when someone called out to him. This person, we soon learn, is named Glaucon, who might or might not be Plato's brother. He wants to find out about the speeches in praise of Eros by Socrates, Alcibiades, and the others at Agathon's supper. "For another person, having heard it from Phoenix, related it to me, and said you also knew it. But he says nothing clearly. So you must relate it to me, for you are the best person to report the words of your companion. But first tell me, were you at that gathering or not?" Apollodorus quickly points out that when the symposium took place he and Glaucon were just boys. However, he has the story from Aristodemus, who was present (he is the same person who told Phoenix), and has confirmed the details with Socrates. The narration begins at last, but not before a further exchange between Apollodorus and one of the unnamed company has revealed Apollodorus as a zealous disciple of Socrates who has earned the reputation of being somewhat mad (*manikos*), and not before all these layers of reporting and time have been laid down. What might appear at first to be a pose of authentication (an eyewitness account verified by Socrates), is soon undermined by the admission that Aristodemus did not remember everything that was said at the famous banquet and Apollodorus, in turn, does not remember everything Aristodemus told him. The result is not only a somewhat wry comment on the problems of oral transmission, but a covert suggestion that what is to follow is going to be largely fiction. Perhaps such a symposium really did occur, but what was said is Plato's free re-creation.

In all the dialogues not only are there none of Xenophon's "I was there" claims, but Plato often seems to go out of his way to let the reader know that he was *not* there. Yet the dialogues are presented with an air of confident and persuasive authenticity. In only one among the many reconstructions of Socrates' talks does Plato indicate his actual presence, and that is at Socrates' trial, as dramatized in the *Apology*. Why not Xenophon's obvious and expected stance? Surely he had been present at enough of Socrates' conversations to recall and re-create them fairly easily. **[End Page 85]** But in fact he chose a very different, very bold approach. It is as if he deliberately flouted the convention of the reporter and deliberately flaunted the fictionality of his accounts, implicitly daring anyone to question their authenticity. The success of this audacity is clearly due to the ease and sureness of his adopting the Socratic persona--of his becoming Socrates. If it is difficult or impossible in the early dialogues to distinguish Plato and Socrates, author and character, it is because they are essentially one. But not because Plato *created* a Socrates and cleverly concealed what he had done, so that we could shrug and say, "Well, the only Socrates we know, after all, is the character Plato created," for the witness of Xenophon tells us that Plato's character was much like the Socrates that both Plato and Xenophon knew.

In any event, Plato appointed himself Socrates' literary executor and then created the literature. [6](#) Socrates left no writings behind. Apparently he did not even much approve of writing, at least as a philosophical medium. But he left behind many words and arguments and an extraordinary personality in the memories of his followers, which Plato took upon himself to re-create in living dialogues. The most outstanding effort to re-create the person Socrates is the *Apology*, a unique feat of impersonation and re-presentation. It is a powerful, moving, yet unsentimental "self"-revelation--so candid indeed that we come away with a clear understanding not only of why Socrates was so revered by some, but of why he was so disliked and mistrusted by others. If the specific charges against him were specious, yet their general and underlying purport was valid. From the point of view of the establishment, with its established codes and beliefs and old tales, Socrates was a corruptor of the young and a religious subversive. He must also have been a thoroughly irritating person, always making people look stupid in public, always challenging their values and comfortable beliefs, making their whole way of life look ridiculous, criticizing their leaders, even criticizing Homer. The wonder is not that he was convicted, but that the vote was so close on the question of his guilt. That vote really speaks much better for the Athenian jurors than one is usually willing to allow. Despite Socrates' provocative and uncontrite demeanor, nearly half of the 500 jurors were apparently able to follow and be persuaded by his **[End Page 86]** rational arguments (he made it an explicit point to appeal only to their reason) and to accept the remarkable claim that everything this self-admitted and self-righteous subversive had done was for *their* own good.

As for his punishment, Socrates suggests that what he *deserves* is to be supported by the state for the rest of his life! A rather arrogant suggestion, it would seem. But was it really? His proposal was defiant

certainly, and no doubt self-righteous, but most fundamentally it was a matter of logical consistency, one of the last examples of a whole life of intellectual consistency, a commitment to following argument where argument leads in the pursuit of truth. [7](#) Since Socrates' life and activities had always been in the service of the state, the only logical penalty was indeed that he should be maintained by the state like other of its devoted servants. Obviously Socrates did not expect his proposal to be taken seriously; it was a very Socratic *jeu d'esprit*. The Socrates of the *Apology* is a man of passionate conviction, but never grim or pontifical or supercilious or vindictive. He enjoys twitting his accusers, it is true, and is proud of his own life, but the pride is often self-deprecatory and the raillery without anger. Given the viciousness and deadly earnestness of the charges, his lack of anger is astonishing. It is a self-directed sense of humor that has him liken himself to a gadfly, a wonderfully trivial metaphor for a life of such dedication that it will even embrace death for principle.

Of all the famous Socratic paradoxes, the greatest may be the paradox of Socrates himself. It is Plato's achievement in the *Apology* to bring out vividly the many sides of Socrates' personality and to make the incongruous congruous. Mystical and practical, eloquent without oratory, intellectual but folksy, austere yet playful, genial but formidable, lovable and odious--a complex, strange, and paradoxical person. Yet Plato makes him not only understandable, but familiar. And it is all accomplished, remarkably, through direct speech. Except for one or two sentences, we hear only the voice of Socrates himself. The *Apology* is essentially a monologue. The form and the accomplishment were unique at the time (and perhaps ever since). Self-revelation in speech was one of Sophocles' distinctive achievements, but quite unlike that of the *Apology*. Gorgias, the rhetorician, had created model apologies, but these were orations: ornate, stilted, and unencumbered with psychological insight. Socrates' speech is, deliberately, not an oration. Eloquent it is, of course, but with a naturalness [\[End Page 87\]](#) of expression unadorned with the flowers of rhetoric. There is nothing really comparable to the *Apology* outside the Platonic canon, or within it either. It stands by itself.

It is original in both form and content, like Socrates himself: unexpected, anomalous, peculiar, unsettling. It seems to have been an achievement of Plato's incorporation of Socrates, speaking in that familiar voice, assuming those familiar idiosyncrasies, reliving them, revealing them, reveling in them, bringing the dead man to life in himself, or at least in his language, or inextricably both. For Plato, this writing of the *Apology* was not only a literary but a psychological *tour de force*. Even if we did not have the evidence of the *Seventh Letter*, we would know, or guess, how bitter an experience the trial and death of Socrates were for Plato. Yet the *Apology* has no bitterness in it. Those feelings of Plato are not there. Plato is not there. Only Socrates--the Socrates that Plato had become.

But the *Apology* is not a typical Socratic dialogue. "Typical" (or perhaps "archetypal") Socratic dialogues--there are about a dozen of them--are fairly short, guided by a search for definition, dominated by the method of disproof (the "elenchus"), and inconclusive ("aporetic"). They also have a characteristic lightness of tone. Socrates is always the central figure, bantering, witty, urbane, and the people he talks to have real character. As vignettes, these dialogues have an intellectual gaiety about them. It is only at the end of this early period that some darker tones creep in. As philosophy, however, the Socratic dialogues are strange because they are so consistently inconclusive, leaving everyone in *aporia*, "pathless," lost in the woods. Typically a question arises casually in conversation, often concerning some practical issue, which Socrates turns into a question of definition. Two gentlemen wonder whether their sons should receive the training of fighting in armor and soon they are discussing the question "What is courage?" Young Charmides is praised for his temperance and right away Socrates wants to know, "What is temperance?" Typically a series of definitions is proposed, each shown by Socrates to be faulty in one way or another, and the discussion ends with the general admission that none of the participants really knows what courage is, or temperance, or virtue, or knowledge, or friendship, or piety.

This seems a strange way to do philosophy. Has philosophy no purpose but to demonstrate ignorance? The method of disproof, *elenchos*, was not new with Socrates or Plato; it was a specialty of the Sophists, who are often seen as relying on facile equivocation to discredit an opponent's argument. But their purpose--at least as Plato and Socrates saw it--was [\[End Page 88\]](#) simply to win verbal contests. Such contests were evidently a popular pastime among bright young Athenians, as popular as athletic contests. Plato often refers to this phenomenon, though seldom so engagingly as in the early *Lysis*, where the boy Lysis is eager to have Socrates argue with the boy's companion, a keen disputant. Why, asks Socrates, "so that I should become a laughing stock?" Oh, no, is the reply, "so that you can cut him down to size." That's what it was all about. But not for Socrates, for whom there were no winners or losers. Or rather both sides were equally winners and losers: losers because they could not find the

truth they were looking for, winners because they had at least found the wrong answers and had thus begun to clear the way to knowledge. This is the way Socrates defends the aporetic discussion.

These early dialogues, delightful in their way, but frustrating, are generally thought to represent fairly accurately the historical Socrates and his practices--in my terms, Plato's successful assimilation of Socrates' mind and character. But the spirit of Socrates in Plato could not rest with dialectical exercises. Valuable though they were, they were not quite "philosophy" after all. At least all the other Greek efforts that went under the name were not merely critical and negative, and never aporetic. There should be a positive side to philosophy as well. The early dialogues do not, strictly, ever reach a level of positive doctrine; all of them (not counting the biographical *Apology* and *Crito*) end inconclusively as to the main issue discussed. On the other hand, they do become richer and more exploratory, and in secondary issues more positive. Such is the *Meno* with its mixed results. The initial question, Can virtue or excellence (*aretē*) be taught?, is answered in a way (negatively), but the fundamental question, What is virtue?, is not answered at all, so the dialogue is essentially aporetic. However, in the course of discussion, a related issue, the "learner's paradox," is presented and resolved. The paradox is that if you really don't know something, you never will, because you will have no way of recognizing it even if you find it; that is, you can recognize it only if you already know it, in which case there would be no point in looking for it. Socrates' solution is interesting and portentous. He evokes the myth, or religious belief, that when we die our souls live on for a while disembodied, at which time they have a pure, direct knowledge of everything. When they are reincarnated they retain a dim memory of that knowledge; thus mortal knowledge is an act of recollection (*anamnēsis*). We really do know what virtue, for example, is: we have only to be reminded somehow, and then we recognize it. This sudden recourse to myth is unexpected, even a little **[End Page 89]** bizarre.⁸ Yet the tale does some poetic justice to the familiar "aha!" experience of coming upon an answer, the feeling that that was it all along, a feeling of recognition, which speaks for Plato's psychological sensitivity and perception.

I called the introduction of the myth portentous because it brought something new and significant into the dialogues. The *Gorgias*, probably written within a few years of the *Meno*, concludes with an eschatological myth told by Socrates; it is a theodicy, a vindication of divine justice rewarding the good in the afterlife. Such myths will become a feature of the "middle period." A new dimension is unfolding in the thought of Plato/Socrates, the limitations of rationality are being supplemented by another kind of thinking: atavistic, one might think, and not very promising. But this odd melding of the practical and mystical will produce Plato's greatest literary achievements. The *Meno*'s mythic explanation of knowledge as recollection is really no explanation at all, and it is eventually abandoned. The eschatological myth of the *Gorgias*, however, recurs twice again in solemn contexts, and may have been an article of faith. But it hardly pretends to be philosophical: it is rather a visionary supplement to philosophy. And it is this visionary quality that will give a power to the dialogues of the middle period lacking in the early ones.

The *Meno* and *Gorgias* have something else in common, muted but equally portentous: both contain vague threats to Socrates. They are not much more than dark hints that occur in passing, but they are again unexpected and subtly jolting. In the *Meno* there is a short interlude when someone named Anytus joins the discussion for a while (an appearance also unexpected and unprepared for) and soon departs, angry because he thinks Socrates has been disparaging the great men of Athens' past and warning him to be careful about what he says, for it is easy for men to come to harm in this city. And who is this Anytus, whose name seems familiar? We remember that he was one of Socrates' accusers at his trial. Again in the *Gorgias*, an increasingly unpleasant exchange between Socrates and Callicles, a crude and menacing figure, is twice punctuated with hardly veiled hints that Socrates' life could be in jeopardy. Why are these disturbing and intrusive reminders surfacing? They have no philosophical **[End Page 90]** relevance certainly. It is as if, after the reliving of more halcyon days, Socrates must approach his death again. In fact, they seem to prepare us for the *Phaedo*, where Socrates' death is first recounted.

Dramatically and poetically, the *Phaedo* is a sustained elegy on the death of Socrates. It is also a meditation on the fate of the just man, in this world and the next. Philosophically it is concerned with arguments for the immortality of the soul. In form it is a modest departure from the "typical" Socratic dialogue. There is no issue of definition, and the approach only hints of the elenchus. Here it is Socrates who presents the arguments for the soul's immortality, and his interlocutors, loving friends not opponents, raise only half-hearted objections. At this sad time they are not eager to participate in Socrates' beloved game of dialectic. The arguments are rational ones, but they do not completely convince Simmias and Cebes, and in the end Socrates agrees that the whole subject needs to be

rethought. Strictly, the dialogue is aporetic. Yet it has little of the aporetic feeling that other dialogues leave one with, probably because of Socrates' eloquence and conviction, rhetorically strengthened by his concluding visionary myth of the judgment of the dead. This is even more elaborate than in the *Gorgias*, exploiting the rich imagery of traditional mythology in a powerful vision of the afterlife. But the substance is not traditional; most importantly, the highest fate is reserved for those who have been "purified by philosophy"; their souls will henceforth live without bodies in some ineffable region. It is a pervasive theme of the *Phaedo* that the life of philosophy, the life of reason, is the highest form of living to which humans can aspire. Such a life is embodied in Socrates, and though he himself is dying, yet the philosopher lives on.

The *Phaedo* is a farewell to Socrates in more than a literal sense. It is not that Plato is "killing him off" here, as a writer disposes of a character, and that he is now ready to assert himself and continue on his own. That is not what happens. Socrates will long continue to be the principal persona of the dialogues and Plato himself will never appear. But significant changes are taking place. The form of the dialogue is evidently moving away from the Socratic model and so is its substance and method. From something essentially critical, limited to examining and cross-examining, it is beginning to offer its own theories, to make positive philosophical claims. The *Phaedo* is particularly notable in this respect, for it introduces for the first time the most renowned of all Plato's contributions to philosophy, the Theory of Forms. At the same time it begins a self-conscious search for a philosophical method in its discussion of hypothesis [\[End Page 91\]](#) and deduction. Both of these developments may be rooted in Socratic definition and elenchus respectively, but they have already grown almost beyond recognition and will continue to mature under Plato's cultivation.

But if it really is *Plato* at work here, advancing his own original ideas, surely it is very odd of him to pretend that they are Socrates' ideas. In the circumstances of a dialogue that is so much *about* Socrates, a study of the man himself, what he stood for and died for, it would seem more than odd--it would seem rather outrageous, or at the very least in bad taste. If Socrates were represented as just a figure, a character, a spokesman, a stylistic device, then the matter would no doubt be more acceptable. But, on the contrary, the dialogue is at some pains to suggest historical accuracy and verisimilitude. One resolution of the puzzle would simply accept, on just these grounds, that the theory as presented here was in fact Socrates' own. Against this is the weighty testimony of Aristotle that it was Plato who first attributed separate existence to the Forms, which is the heart of the theory. It has also been noted that the theory has the appearance of being presented here for the first time as something new. In fact, it has not been a matter of discussion in earlier dialogues (though there might be possible allusions). Then again, the use of Socrates as principal speaker may have become such a habit that he had become more of a literary device than a person, so that giving him unSocratic views would not have been much noticed by Plato or anyone else. But the context of the *Phaedo* argues strongly against that; moreover, if there were such a habit, it would be shaken off later and still later unaccountably resumed. If the Theory of Forms was not the work or idea of the historical Socrates, though he may have provided the basic ingredients, we might nevertheless say that it was the work of the Socrates that Plato had become. Both a misrepresentation and a tribute then, yet neither, for in neither case was it deliberate or conscious. Plato need not have thought at all about "whose" theory it was, his or Socrates'--there was no difference. [9](#) [\[End Page 92\]](#)

We are now in the middle period, with such major dialogues as *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Republic*, universally recognized as among Plato's greatest literary achievements. The dialogue form is kept, but it is becoming a different kind of thing. Socrates spends little time examining and criticizing his interlocutors' ideas, but rather propounds his own in arguments that elicit step-by-step agreement from the other participants--a new version of dialectic. Conclusions are reached; the dialogues do not end in Socratic befuddlement. And they pronounce on grand themes--love, death, justice, and truth. At their highest moments they become visionary. It is in this period that Plato makes his greatest use of myth: the eschatological myths of cosmic justice, the famous allegorical myth of the Cave, the flight of the Charioteer, the ascent of the soul to pure beauty--stories that still captivate the imagination. Though the myths are presented diffidently, even apologetically, they show the visionary power of the seer. So Socrates too has become something different, something more than clever dialectician, wise critic, and moral sage.

But there is another character that emerges in these dialogues to a position of dominance. He is not a person and has no proper name, nor is he a participant in discussion, but rather a figure of repeated exaltation. This is the lover of wisdom, the philosopher. He has been around before, of course, chiefly in

the person of Socrates, but the figure now assumes an almost mythic status, and the idea of the philosopher has acquired new meaning. It coincides with and depends on the emergence of the Theory of Forms. For now the philosopher is not just any lover of wisdom, but one who apprehends the Forms themselves in their absoluteness and purity, the only real objects of knowledge and desire. For such knowledge, the body is little more than a hindrance, whose senses mislead and appetites distract. Hence the emergence of a Platonic psychology of higher and lower parts of the soul, and the exaltation of reason. The middle dialogues are paeans to the life of reason and the love of wisdom. But such knowledge goes beyond ordinary understanding, and the grasp of the Forms is often expressed in mythical and mystical language.

This figure of the philosopher is not Socrates, nor any person, but an archetype, an ideal. Plato never calls it a Form, but it surely belongs, in some sense, to the same family as Beauty itself, Justice itself, etc., transcendent and pure, an *eidos* in which particular philosophers "participate." Such a conception allowed Plato to transcend his psychological identification with Socrates. The identification, the synthesis, is not yet broken, but is being transformed. It is not that Plato is coming into his own **[End Page 93]** as Plato; he will, in fact, never assert his own identity. Rather than becoming Plato, he is becoming the Philosopher, participating ever more fully in an impersonal ideal. If Socrates and he were both sharers in the *eidos* and thus one in that sense, he could begin to leave Socrates behind without a sense of betrayal or of self-serving.

Plato's middle period was the most creative time of his career. It is alive with the sense of discovery. He was discovering nothing less than a new reality, one long implicit but only now coming fully into consciousness, a world of eternal, unchanging--and therefore divine--Forms behind the Heraclitean flux of sensations, and just because eternal and unchanging, more real than the phenomenal world. That this involved intense personal experience seems to be reflected in the mystical flights of the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, and transformed his sense of what it was to be a philosopher. Each dialogue after the *Phaedo* carried him further beyond what he had learned from Socrates, or from "being" Socrates. It would have been increasingly difficult to maintain Socratic potentiality for what was happening in his own mind.

It is in fact a peculiarity of the later dialogues that Plato seems uncertain about what to do with Socrates. In some, Socrates is as usual the principal speaker; in others he is merely a listener to someone else's exposition; in the *Laws* he does not appear at all. The *Parmenides* represents Socrates as both an active speaker, in the first half of the dialogue, and a silent listener in the second. The first part is a lively exchange mainly between Parmenides and Socrates, in which the youthful Socrates unsuccessfully attempts to defend his Theory of Forms against the criticisms of the old Eleatic philosopher, here playing the role we are used to seeing Socrates in, and the whole discussion ends in the aporetic vein. The second part is a lengthy solo display by Parmenides of his hypothetico-deductive method of dialectics, a display sufficiently mind-boggling that scholars are divided on whether to take it seriously or treat it as some kind of highly intellectual joke. Whatever it is, however, it is thoroughly tedious. Parmenides is the first of a series of "strangers" who will take the place of Socrates. [10](#) The possibility of leaving Socrates behind was implanted and took root. And Plato was aware of it. A young Socrates could be more easily **[End Page 94]** criticized than the mature man. For the first time Socrates is put in the position of one of his own "victims," a daring idea and perhaps emancipatory, for it humanized Socrates. Did Socrates *need* humanizing? The need is certainly not apparent throughout most of the early dialogues. One of Socrates' greatest claims on our interest and delight in him is his beguiling humanity. It may be, however, that as he becomes more of a seer in the middle dialogues--the mystic is never quite one of us--some small doubt arises. In the middle dialogues, Plato had begun to make Socrates just a little more than human; or rather, that co-evolution of Socrates and Plato, united in one mind, had carried "them" to vertiginous heights. In the *Parmenides*, Plato looked back to a time when Socrates himself was young, long before their spirits had joined, and could begin their separation, a separation to be completed by the end of the *Statesman*.

Another distinctive feature of the later dialogues is that so many are continuous groups with explicit references backwards and forwards to other dialogues. There are two such sequences. The *Timaeus* and the unfinished *Critias* are represented as discussions immediately succeeding and continuing that of the *Republic*. [11](#) The *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* are represented as continuous discussions with a fourth dialogue on the Philosopher projected but unwritten. They have also this in common that the first dialogue of each sequence (*Republic* and *Theaetetus*) is dominated by Socrates, who then gives place to other speakers in the succeeding dialogues (*Timaeus* and *Critias* in their dialogues, the

Eleatic Stranger in the other group). The pattern corresponds to that of the *Parmenides*. Evidently Plato is trying to do something with Socrates: both the character in the dialogues and the Socrates within him. And as Socrates recedes, the tone and style of the dialogues change radically.

The change is very striking in the group of "epistemological dialogues" beginning with the *Theaetetus*. The *Theaetetus* itself seems almost atavistic, for it revives and brings to final perfection the Socratic [End Page 95] dialogue, a form some time in abeyance. That is, it is definitional, elenctic, and aporetic. *Theaetetus* proposes a series of definitions of knowledge, each of which is dialectically examined by Socrates and found wanting, and the dialogue ends inconclusively. Socrates is his old self and in fine form, witty and friendly with his young interlocutor and modest about himself: deprecating his philosophical "barrenness," he calls himself a mere midwife of ideas that others give birth to. There is none of the middle-period visionary or mythographer about Socrates here; he tells no stories, nor do we hear much of anything about the Forms, but he praises philosophy and the pursuit of knowledge and truth. The whole dialogue reads like a deliberate and elegant homage to Socrates. When, however, Socrates yields to the anonymous visitor from Elea in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, everything changes. Even those who appreciate the philosophical achievement of these two dialogues will admit that they are dry and tiresome. They have no wit, no charm, no grace, no drama, no characters; the erstwhile engaging *Theaetetus* is reduced to cardboard, and the Stranger is no more than a voice relentlessly pursuing a logic of "divisions." By this method, undoubtedly Plato's own discovery, decisive conclusions are reached: sophist and statesman are nailed to the wall. Nothing aporetic here. Indeed nothing Socratic. Is this Stranger, so humorless, methodical, and tedious, Plato's ideal philosopher? It is hard to accept such a conclusion, but harder to avoid. However ambiguous the voice of Socrates may have been, the Stranger is certainly Plato's dummy and nothing else; and the *Laws*, the work most unequivocally Plato's own, is in much the same numbing style. The latter consideration virtually rules out the hope of irony in the character of the Eleatic Stranger.

The early Socrates--the clever critic, the master of the elenchus, the man who knows nothing--is beautifully revived and revivified only to fall back into the shadows, to become a ghost, perhaps a ghost being laid. There is a double poignancy in the way this series begins (forgotten by the time we gratefully reach the end of the *Statesman*). It begins with the voices of two men commenting sadly on the imminent death of *Theaetetus* as he is being brought home from the army at Corinth, and one of them recalls how promising a youth Socrates had found him. Years ago, just a short time before Socrates' own death, the two had engaged in a memorable discussion, which Socrates had told Euclid, one of the present speakers, who had written it down and now reads it aloud. We are deliberately reminded of the deaths of both participants and are asked to believe that the whole long discussion that constitutes the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* took [End Page 96] place very near the end of Socrates' life. By the end of the discussion this resonance has faded away almost completely, just as Socrates himself fades away, and this is probably a deliberate effect, meant to reflect Plato's self-conception of his own development. So the dramatic prelude has a point, a purpose, that lies outside the content of the dialogues themselves.

Perhaps it is as well that Plato never wrote the dialogue on the Philosopher he had projected to complete the *Theaetetus* group; it would have been a creature very remote from Socrates--or so these contrasts indicate--and much less attractive. It is possible that Plato himself, seeing where his thoughts were taking him, recoiled at the prospect. This would not be the philosopher extolled and exalted earlier, the contemplator of pure ideas, raised on mystical wings, but a logic machine, a grinder of dialectic.

The *Timaeus* and *Critias*, whenever they were actually written (certainly very late), were evidently meant to be read as sequels to the *Republic*. Here too Socrates recedes well into the background, becoming at best a passive listener as Timaeus expounds an elaborate cosmology and Critias begins a history of civilizations with the tale of Atlantis. Neither dialogue is a dialogue, nor is either dialectical; they are imaginative monologues. Why Socrates does not narrate the *Timaeus* seems fairly obvious. Plato had already shown him as lacking interest in cosmological speculation, at least in his adult life, but Plato himself was interested and wanted to present his own speculations, so he took the obvious recourse of relating them in another voice than Socrates'. Why not his own? Perhaps the habit had taken hold by this time; after so many years of assuming a persona, and so many years of writing in conversational form, he was not yet ready to write a straightforward treatise--and indeed never would be. He might, as a rhetorical and logical exercise, impersonate Parmenides, but he could not assume such a stance for himself. So "Timaeus" was an easy alternative. Since this *Timaeus* is quite unknown outside of the dialogue, [12](#) and since he is represented there as a person of eminence in both science and politics, it

seems safe to assume that he is a fictional character and might as well have been called the Locrian Stranger as given a proper name. [13](#) Critias is hardly more identifiable. Though the historical grandfather of Critias the oligarch *might* be intended, he is still little more than a name. [\[End Page 97\]](#)

In the last dialogues, then, including the *Laws* of course, a series of essentially anonymous philosophical speakers supersedes both the Socrates of the early dialogues and the Plato/Socrates of the middle period. There is no more resemblance to the one than to the other. The last dialogues show a drastic, though orderly, retreat from the inspired, poetically powerful achievements of the middle period. With the emergence of the Philosopher, philosophy becomes something quite different from what had been so revered, even divinized, in the *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*.

But what about the *Philebus*, where Socrates is again in charge? The chronological place of the *Philebus* in Plato's writings has always been uncertain, though there is all but universal agreement that it is late; the most common assignment places it between the *Statesman* and *Timaeus*. If that is indeed where it belongs, then one must posit a revival of Socrates for the particular purposes of this dialogue.

[14](#) This would not be inappropriate, for an important part of the discussion has to do with the Theory of Forms--not *eo nomine*, but it is surely the matrix of the effort to find a minimal number of abstract categories that will encompass all things (here the Unlimited, Limit, Combination, and Cause)--and Plato had always put that theory in Socrates' mouth. On the other hand, the Socrates of the *Philebus* is more exhumed than revived. He is certainly not the lively, bantering, shrewdly critical interrogator of the *Theaetetus* nor the inspired and eloquent seer of the middle period. Nor is the dialogue in "Socratic" form. Very much in the late manner, bereft of any human context or drama or poetry, it marches--or lurches--to definite conclusions, particularly that reason is a greater good than sensual pleasure, which is the subject of discussion. The conclusion is not surprising. What is surprising is that it has so little grandeur: it is far from a paean to the life of reason, of the kind we have heard before.

But it may well be that the common chronology of the *Philebus* is wrong, that in fact it precedes the *Sophist* and all the rest of the late dialogues in which Socrates is silent or absent. This is the conclusion recently come to by Gerard R. Ledger [15](#) in a sophisticated computer [\[End Page 98\]](#) analysis of Plato's language. Though I cannot judge the methodology, the results fit very well the pattern of psychological development I have been trying to argue here. From this perspective, the *Philebus* would have been the last use of Socrates as principal speaker before the Philosopher took over, and clearly shows the strain of maintaining the Socratic persona, for this Socrates has only the name, nothing else.

The *Laws* has almost always been assumed to be Plato's last work, a judgment based partly on its form and style, but perhaps just as importantly on the tradition reported by Diogenes Laertius that at the time of Plato's death, it was left "in wax," that is, what today we would call an unpublished manuscript. Ledger's computer analysis, however, suggests that the *Laws* was written before the *Timaeus* and *Critias*--the last works in his scheme. What seems most likely in fact is that Plato was revising the *Laws* at the same time as he was writing other things, so that in a real sense it remains his final work; and judging from its great length and the enormous effort that had to have gone into it, Plato himself may well have considered it the culmination of his career. It is a huge edifice, without grace, proportion, or style, and with hardly a gesture towards dramatization or even dialogue. Again it is a "stranger," [16](#) this time from Athens, who does all the talking. What he talks about is political system, reviving the legislative fantasy of the *Republic*, though now in a more practical mode. There is no talk here of philosopher-kings and twenty-years' training in mathematics; it is sufficient that the rulers be old and wise. No metaphysical Form of the Good is mentioned, or indeed anything metaphysical. Except in the loose sense that it contains many astute observations about life and society, the *Laws* is not a philosophical work at all. That is one reason for its comparative neglect. Another is the disagreeable spirit of the laws so endlessly promulgated--disagreeable to most of us anyway--for not only is it morally strait-laced, but the laws severely regulate and monitor every detail of normal life.

In general, the *Laws* has been something of a puzzle and embarrassment to Plato's countless admirers. It is a little vexing that so brilliant a [\[End Page 99\]](#) career should be capped by such a work. There seems something massively petty about it. Still, one can hardly doubt that Plato himself took it very seriously; it must have been the product of many years of thought and labor late in life. Its tone is relentlessly serious; there is no trace of playfulness or irony. Like it or not, it is by no means a work of Plato's dotation; it is the product of a keen, controlled, reflective intelligence. It seems inescapable that Plato himself must have regarded it as a fitting capstone of his career. Yet, despite the presence of some Platonic concerns and themes, the *Laws* as a whole is uncharacteristic of Plato's work. It stands

by itself in isolated and oppressive grandeur.

The explanation for the peculiar phenomenon of the *Laws* may be that it is the first and last work of Plato himself--*houtos ho estin*, himself-what-he-is, the real Plato standing up at last. By his own account, his first ambitions in life were political. Disenchanted with the unsavory realities of Athenian politics, he came under the spell of Socrates, whose subsequent execution by the state turned disenchantment into revulsion. Yet his personal involvement in Sicilian politics and the writing of the *Republic*, both in mid-career, indicate that the politician in him had not been completely superseded by the philosopher. His enduring secret image of himself was Plato the Lawgiver, surfacing for a while in the *Republic*, no doubt suppressed for a while by his misadventures in Sicily, but eventually re-emerging full-blown in the *Laws*. And why not a lawgiver? Did he not have the accumulated wisdom from years of observation of how politics fail and as many years of reflection on what a good society should and might be? And what better time to set down his program than in his wise old age? But there was a problem of voice. After all these years, could he at last present himself in his own person with his own name? Perhaps that would be too great a rupture of life-long habit (as would writing a straightforward treatise instead of disguising it as dialogue). The compromise he chose, a nameless "Athenian Stranger," is poignant, for this is not an adopted persona like the Eleatic Stranger; it is hardly a persona at all, but clearly Plato himself. It is poignant because it betrays his own alienation: he is an Athenian stranger, not in the positive sense that, as he once thought, every true philosopher had to be a stranger in this world of shadows, but because he is a stranger to himself, to the man Plato, the aristocrat and citizen of Athens, who had started out with the keen desire to be a transforming force in the political world, a mover and leader, but who in the end, estranged from that world, could only realize his ideas in a ponderous and uninspiring fiction. **[End Page 100]**

The historical Socrates, so far as one can judge, but certainly the Socrates Plato represents, was completely at home in Athens, daily roaming its streets and talking with anyone who came along, a well-known figure in a city that afforded him endless opportunity for lively intellectual intercourse. Even the potential dangers of his activities were part of an exciting atmosphere. Plato, by contrast, seems to have been for most of his life alienated from the life of the city, especially its ubiquitous and, for him, contemptible politics. The Academy, deliberately isolated from the civic world, was a haven of withdrawal. It was here, from a comfortable distance, that Plato could participate vicariously and imaginatively in the real life of the city of Socrates by submerging his own personality in impersonations. But it was also in this literary re-creation that Plato found his own growth and greatest achievements. For it is the figure of Socrates that gives weight, credibility, and delight to Plato's metaphysical flights of imagination. Even though we know the words and thoughts of the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* are Plato's, they are given another compelling voice and presence. It is Socrates we see and hear, a man with tough bare feet firmly on the ground. It is an image that gives a paradoxical solidity to otherworldly speculation. But as Plato experiments with other voices and Socrates gradually disappears, this quality fades and, with it, delight. Plato without Socrates has philosophical greatness, especially in his logical and epistemological investigations, but the late dialogues have little life or joy in them. Without the indwelling presence of Socrates, Plato becomes estranged from both the mundane and the spiritual; living dialogue is replaced by treatises and edicts, and freedom of the imagination is constricted by systematics.

Plato's literary works have become so familiar over the centuries that the fundamental strangeness of their overall shape is easy to overlook. The fact that a "Socratic problem" even exists is itself remarkable and unique. No other well-known intellectual career in history, I think, presents a comparable problem. For here it is not just a matter of inspiration or influence or someone continuing and developing the work of another, not a history of ideas, nor a tradition of learning, not just intellectual indebtedness--these are relationships that, though often complex, are analyzable, familiar, understandable. The relationship between Plato and Socrates is more mysterious. For a time, the dialogues reflect a profound identification with, and assimilation of, Socrates. Subsequently, they reveal a paradoxical and uncanny synergy, the working together of two minds in a burst of creativity and intellectual imagination. Finally, thirty to forty years after the **[End Page 101]** actual death of Socrates, Plato begins to disengage himself from this spiritual unity and gradually emerges as a philosopher in his own right. But not in his own name. Having joined his soul to another's, he could never quite reclaim it for himself.

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Notes

[1.](#) Diès 1926.180.

[2.](#) The years 1932-33 saw the near simultaneous publication of three classic accounts: Taylor 1932, Ross 1933, and Rogers 1933. Rogers' book is still the most thorough and judicious sorting-out of the issues involved. Others have thought such a task futile. Thus Diès 1926.181: "prétendre marquer où s'arrête Socrate, où commence Platon, c'est vouloir dissoudre ce qui fait la vie même du Socrate platonicien: la fusion de deux êtres en une seule pensée." More recently Havelock 1983.162-63 has taken much the same view.

[3.](#) Cf. Edelstein 1962, Plass 1964. Both suggest a kind of self-abnegation in the service of making philosophical truths shine more brightly.

[4.](#) Field 1930.ch. 10-11.

[5.](#) This seems now to be generally accepted: Taylor 1932.13-25, Ross 1933.10-11, Rogers 1933.ch. 7, Guthrie 1969.333-48, Vlastos 1991.ch. 3.

[6.](#) Graham 1992 suggests that Plato had to create a Socratic "tradition" to validate his own place in the history of philosophy: "If Plato wants to publish Plato, he must first publish Socrates" (p. 150).

[7.](#) Cf. Brickhouse and Smith 1989.210-25.

[8.](#) Guthrie 1956.25 was willing at least half seriously to mark this passage, introduced by a distinct and solemn change of tone, as the very moment when Socratic dialogue first becomes Platonic dialogue. The pivotal position of the *Meno* is also asserted by Kahn 1981 and Vlastos 1991.118-20.

[9.](#) Taylor 1937.176 thought that if the Theory was not authentically Socratic, to put it into Socrates' mouth would have been an unconscionable "misrepresentation." Raven 1965.86 described it rather as "an exceptionally graceful tribute" since "the theory was ultimately due to the influence of Socrates." A similar position had already been taken by Rogers 1933.151-53. Guthrie 1969.353 has put well what seems pretty much a consensus by now: "The justification, then, in Plato's mind for putting a doctrine into Socrates' mouth was not that the doctrine *tel quel*, in its complete form, had been taught by Socrates, but that it could appear to Plato to be based on one of Socrates' fundamental convictions, and constitute a legitimate projection, explication and defense of it."

[10.](#) The replacement of Socrates as principal speaker by another personage in the late dialogues has always been taken as a clear sign that the views expressed were too unSocratic for Plato to attribute to even a fictional Socrates. So, e.g., Ross 1933.231-32, Vlastos 1988.109.

[11.](#) The dramatic situation at the beginning of the *Timaeus* does not require that we imagine the whole of the *Republic* being recited the previous day (Cornford 1937.4-5), but that is the assumption any reader or listener would almost inevitably make. Of course the much earlier *Republic* does not anticipate any trilogy sequel (apparently a third dialogue, *Hermocrates*, was planned but not written); rather, the late, grand-scale political project looks back to the political books of the *Republic* as an appropriate starting place. The *Theaetetus*, on the other hand, though also probably written considerably earlier than the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, does end with the prospect of continuing the discussion "in the morning."

[12.](#) Guthrie 1978.244.

[13.](#) Cornford 1937.3: "The probability is that Plato invented him [Timaeus]."

[14.](#) Vlastos 1988.109: "When the centre of gravity moves far enough from the ethical core of [Socrates'] concerns the persona of Socrates is displaced in this period by new protagonists: Parmenides, Timaeus, the Eleatic Stranger, the Athenian Stranger. When the centre moves back to its earlier place, as it does in the *Philebus*, Socrates is recalled to his former role." (Vlastos' chronology places the *Philebus* next to last in the canon, before the *Laws*.)

[15.](#) Ledger 1989.

16. Guthrie 1978.122 objects to the translation "Stranger," especially with a capital letter, preferring lower-case "visitor." Neither word quite does justice to *xenos*, which has a range of related meanings, including "guest," "visitor," "stranger," "foreigner," "alien"--in general any kind of outsider, someone who is not one of "us." In any case, "Eleatic Stranger" and "Athenian Stranger" have become the standard English designations of these speakers.

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