

## Plato's styles and characters: between literature and philosophy

Plato's styles and characters: this symposium takes platonic studies one step beyond in the examination of Plato's literary craft. The second half a last century has seen the raising interest in – to quote the title of an influential book published in 1996 – the philosophical use of a literary form, that is, in the case of Plato, the dialogue form<sup>1</sup>. In itself, such an interest has a very long history : it was already a question raised by the platonists in Ancient times, such as Proclus, and has been treated under various angles in modern times<sup>2</sup>. How did such an original form as the one entailing dialogues among various characters provide Plato with a very special tool to write philosophy – one at the same time very rich, enabling him to encompass an indefinite variety of opinions, forms of reasoning, styles, places, situations, topics, and ambiguous – we never hear Plato speaking in his own name, in contrast with most of his predecessors ? After the seminal endeavours by Hans Georg Gadamer<sup>3</sup> and Victor Goldschmidt<sup>4</sup>, one can follow in the second half of the century, in all cultural areas of platonic studies, the quest for an interpretation of Plato that makes philosophical sense of the Athenian's use of the dialogue form, in the eighties in Germany<sup>5</sup>, in the nineties in the French-<sup>6</sup> and English-speaking<sup>7</sup> areas, and, of course, in many other countries and hermeneutical traditions.

The question of the dialogue form, as it has been developed, is however not enough for a deeper understanding of Plato's literary craft and its meaning for philosophical writing. It has most of the time been developed without much attention to the context in which the dialogue form was actually invented. The important comparative studies in this direction remained few<sup>8</sup>, and their results are probably not taken into account as they deserve: for instance, the important discovery by Karl Joël of the fictitious feature of the *sokratikos logos* as a literary genre could have more impact on the way the dialogue form is used in interpreting and periodising Plato. More generally we are still missing knowledge on the actual relationships existing between Platon's writing and the various kind of styles that existed in his time and cultural background : possible influences, reuse of existing material in all possible ways, from direct influence to strategical detournment. We are missing a more general study of what Plato read (to use a recent title from Emily Kutash) and used in crafting his texts, from Hippocrates to Aristophanes, from Homer, Hesiod or Solon to the orators and historians, etc. A recent work from J. Kennedy even suggests that

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<sup>1</sup> Charles H Kahn, *Plato and the socratic dialogue : the philosophical use of a literary form*, 1 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Gill, "Le dialogue platonicien," in *Lire Platon*, ed. Luc Brisson and Francesco Fronterotta (Presses Universitaires de France - PUF, 2006), 53-75.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *Platos dialektische Ethik : phänomenologische Interpretationen zum "Philebos"*, 1931.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Goldschmidt, *Les dialogues de Platon : structure et méthode dialectique*, Bibliothèque de philosophie contemporaine. Histoire de la philosophie et philosophie générale, 1947.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Alexander Szlezák, *Platon und die Schriftlichkeit der Philosophie : Interpretationen zu den frühen und mittleren Dialogen*, 1985.

<sup>6</sup> Monique Dixsaut, *Le naturel philosophe : essai sur les dialogues de Platon*, Collection d'Etudes Anciennes. Tradition de la Pensée Classique, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Myles Burnyeat, *The Theaetetus of Plato*, trans. M. J Levett, 1990; Christopher Gill and Mary Margaret McCabe, *Form and argument in late Plato*, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Joël, "Der Logos Sôkratikos (I)," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, no. 8 (1895): p. 466-483; Karl Joël, "Der Logos Sôkratikos (II)," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, no. 9 (1896): p. 50-66; Livio Rossetti, *Aspetti della letteratura socratica antica*, ed. Università degli studi G, 1977.

a musical structure might operate inside the platonic dialogues.<sup>9</sup>

The use of characters is one of the fruitful fields opened to us. It is an important trait of Plato's way of writing philosophy, one that needs to be understood in its singularity in comparison to others genres of writing also using characters before him – poetry, history, etc. Taking up historical figures, from Pericles to Alcibiades, Plato finds himself in a field already occupied by other talented writers, for instance Thucydides. Creating new characters – for instance the Sophists – Platon also crafts new literary devices in prosa – see for instance Thrasymachus as an embodiment of the Thumos, like a lion<sup>10</sup>. In the last decade, this field has been revived : we have new tools to get to know Plato's characters<sup>11</sup> and a renewed desired to understand the way he plays with them<sup>12</sup>.

Style also opens many other uncharted territories. The uses of style, expressions, arguments, concepts, coming from all the kinds of writings Plato read, is still only sketched. On a microscopic scale – the word, the phrase – Souilhé<sup>13</sup> and Taylor<sup>14</sup> both showed that there could be a lot to find in the way Plato might have taken from the hippocratics the very words he uses as main concepts of this philosophy and the phrases he uses to constructs them – *eidōs*, *idea*, *dunamis*, and such phrases as *auta kath' auta*. On a more macroscopic scale, we are still in need of deepening our understanding of how Plato rewrites his predecessors. How does he rewrite Herodotus and Thucydides<sup>15</sup> ? How does he rewrite Aesop<sup>16</sup> ? Homer ? Hesiod<sup>17</sup> ? Classic and recent studies in this field need to be expanded.

This conference will gather scholars in platonic studies to make contributions and show the way for further research in these directions. There is a lot we can learn from a closer examination of Plato's literary art of writing philosophy in its cultural and historical context. Comparing is not erasing singularity, and loosing track of the specificity of philosophical writing: to the contrary, understanding how Plato turned the various styles and devices of his predecessors into elements of his own writing is a key step in assessing the real singularity of his writing and the conception of philosophy it conveys – maybe as an art of writing bold enough to encompass any style, any reality, and open itself to all speeches and practices through which the men of Plato's time and culture were experiencing themselves and the world around them.

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<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, J. B. *The Musical Structure of Plato's Dialogues*. Durham, Acumen, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> T. D. J. Chappell, "The Virtues of Thrasymachus," *Phronesis* 38, no. 1 (1993): 1-17.

<sup>11</sup> Debra Nails, *The people of Plato : a prosopography of Plato and other socratics*, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Ruby Blondell, *The play of character in Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Souilhé, "Etude sur le terme 'dunamis' dans les dialogues de Platon : thèse complémentaire présentée à la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Poitiers" (Thèse compl., F. Alcan, 1919).

<sup>14</sup> Alfred Edward Taylor, *Varia Socratica : first series*, St. Andrews University publications (Oxford: J. Parker, 1911).

<sup>15</sup> Marie-Laurence Desclos, "Le philosophe et l'historien : recherches sur le statut de l'historiographie classique (Hérodote, Thucydide) dans les dialogues de Platon" (Thèse de doctorat, [s.n.], 1989); Jean-François Pradeau, *Le monde de la politique : sur le récit atlante de Platon, Timée (17-27) et Critias*, International Plato studies - Sankt Augustin : Academia Verlag, 1997 ; Marie-Laurence Desclos, *Aux marges des dialogues de Platon : essai d'histoire anthropologique de la philosophie ancienne*, 1 vols., Horos (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Marie-Laurence Desclos, "Le rire comme conduite de vie : l'Esopos de Platon," in *Le rire des Grecs : anthropologie du rire en Grèce ancienne* (Editions Jérôme Millon, 2000), 441-457.

<sup>17</sup> G. R. Boys-Stones and J. H. Haubold, *Plato and Hesiod* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2010).