

LEXIS

Poetica, retorica e comunicazione nella tradizione classica

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<http://www.lexisonline.eu/>
info@lexisonline.eu, infolexisonline@gmail.com

Direzione e Redazione:

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia
Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici
Palazzo Malcanton Marcorà – Dorsoduro 3484/D
I-30123 Venezia

Vittorio Citti vittorio.citti@gmail.it

Paolo Mastandrea mast@unive.it

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socratica, secondo quanto ci tramandano le testimonianze antiche.

Chiudono il volume l'indice dei nomi (pp. 339-49), l'indice delle cose notevoli (pp. 351-6) e l'indice delle opere e dei passi citati (pp. 357-80).

Numerosi sono i temi, le questioni e le problematiche affrontate in questo volume dall'Autore, le une strettamente collegate alle altre e nonostante la quantità e la difficoltà degli argomenti trattati, il lettore, anche il meno esperto, mai perderà il filo della trattazione, grazie all'organizzazione razionale del testo, alla linearità delle osservazioni e al rigore metodologico. L'intera riflessione di C., molto curata anche dal punto di vista formale, getta nuova luce sulla pratica simposiale e rappresenta dunque una lezione di metodo, nonché un valido e nuovo strumento di lavoro, agevole e pratico nella consultazione, senza dubbio utile per lo studio del testo teogonico e della pratica simposiale in generale, grazie alle solide argomentazioni, all'ampia contestualizzazione di ogni singolo problema e alla linearità dell'esposizione.

Silvia Pagni
silvia.pagni@alice.it

Livio Rossetti, *Le dialogue socratique*, Paris, Encre Marine–Les Belles Lettres, 2011, pp. 292; ISBN: 9782350880419; € 35,00.

1. *Le dialogue socratique* brings together some of the most relevant contributions to the textual analysis of Socratic dialogues and to the 'Socratic question' produced by Livio Rossetti in the last two decades. An *Avant-Propos* by the French psychoanalyst and Socratic scholar François Roustang introduces the collection. It includes eight different studies, all published from 1998 to 2010 on different occasions, some of them already in French, now all translated in that language. The author's outstanding familiarity with Socratic literature is reasserted once again in this volume, *inter alia*, by the refusal to pay any unnecessary reverence to the hero of the dialogues: although benevolent in the end, Socrates emerges as an unsettling and domineering figure, whose words and attitudes are essentially problematic and distressing. Rossetti holds that this is the distinctive representation which prevails in Socratic literature and which is ultimately grounded in historical reality.

The book's rhapsodic format may entail some minor repetitions but produces no contradictory statements. The consistency of Rossetti's main purpose remains obvious throughout: to extract a comprehensive meaning out of different dramatic narrations centered on Socrates in dialogue. The dramatic upsurge of Socratic literature after Socrates' death was an unprecedented phenomenon. The general background was provided by the cognitively-oriented discourse which developed at Athens approximately during the last thirty years of the Fifth Century B.C. and the first thirty years of the Fourth. These were indeed the respective periods when: (a) the living Socrates became known as the paramount practitioner of a method for dialogue articulating some specific modes of argument, examination and refutation, thus occasioning a discursive paradigm that was liable to be reproduced within the group gathering around the 'Master' (Rossetti has no qualms in using this term, in conjunction with 'disciples'); (b) the dead Socrates was turned into the literary hero of a fast-growing series of written texts, all purporting to reproduce the 'genuine' Socratic modality for engaging in dialogical exchange, such a massive output, inevitably, producing a mass of divergent if not contrasting relates. Along with a wealth of pointed remarks (among others, about the necessity of an institutionalized textual production in writing as the means for celebrating Socrates' achievements, or about the shortcomings of

both the analytical and the exoteric interpretations of the Platonic text), Rossetti develops two main ideas: (i) in order to make full sense of a Socratic dialogue, the analysis should not be limited to the 'ideas' being stated by any character; what is needed is a comprehensive dramatic reading of the characters' interaction; (ii) although dramatic reading *per se* does not consider the degree of fictionality / veridicity of the examined text, different depictions of the Socratic style of dialogue may be shown to coincide in displaying some feature having factually belonged to the 'historical' Socrates.

2. *Le dialogue socratique* is organized as a Ring-composition. Chapter 1, discussing 'the Socratic dialogue *in statu nascendi*', deals with quantity. It presents the Socratic genre as a fully-fledged literary innovation from start, which achieved a literary hegemony of sorts in the Athenian cultural milieu in the first decades of the Fourth Century B.C. Written relates of individual Socratic dialogues were produced in considerable quantity and with high intensity. Rossetti enumerates 14 known Socratic authors and estimates the likely overall output at 300 «unités dialogiques», which would give an average rate of production of one per month in a quarter of a century (according to Rossetti, an individual piece of preserved Socratic literature may include several of such 'units'). The last chapter (8: *Les socratiques "premiers philosophes" et Socrate "premier philosophe"*) provides the response and deals with quality. It assesses the role of the intellectual circle originally gathering around Socrates as a living example, and, subsequently, of all those labeling themselves as perpetuators of the Socratic way of life and teaching, in giving both shape and substance to the notion and to the very word of 'philosophy'. Although the 'historical' Socrates does not seem to have applied the substantive 'philosopher' to himself, he did impulse a notional elaboration which was then to be completed by Aristotle.

3. In between, Rossetti discusses some carefully selected texts. Chapters 2 and 3 consider two different instances of Socratic dialogue as related by Xenophon, respectively *Mem.* 4.2 and 3.8.1-7: Socrates' confrontation with Euthydemus and with Aristippus. It is generally held that Xenophon shows no special interest, or possibly understanding, for Socrates' elenctic procedures: the only instance he gives is precisely *Mem.* 4.2. Rossetti's close reading of this little drama, which he calls «L'*Euthydème* de Xénophon», proves on the contrary that Xenophon, his occasional fondness for a platitudinous Socrates notwithstanding (just see the immediate follow-up to the Aristippus scene at *Mem.* 3.8.9 s. for an example), has the full capability to issue an articulate description of the Socratic *elenchus* in action. Socrates, in his attempt to draw Euthydemus within his circle and providing him with an authentic *paideia*, coldly initiates a series of provocations, and then puts all his argumentative resources to the task of throwing the young man into despair. Rossetti also links this scene to the episode narrated at *Mem.* 3.8.1-7: Aristippus attempts to do to Socrates what Socrates has been doing to him so far. Yet his efforts to extract some answers to the successive questions: "What is the Good? What is the Beautiful?" produce no result: Socrates simply dodges the issue. The two textual instances therefore combine in describing elenctic discourse as a standardized dialogical method, especially effective in destroying whatever cognitive certitudes, or even just beliefs, the opponent may have been holding initially. The procedure rests on some well-defined 'rules of the game' (for instance: that one should not refuse to answer the specific questions one is being asked); and is typically practiced within the Socratic circle. An over-confident and possibly disrespectful disciple may even try to turn it against the Master: yet Socrates, even at the cost of breaking the rules, simply refuses to undergo *elenchus* at Aristippus' initiative.

4. The central place in *Le dialogue socratique* is taken by the long chapter (4) devoted to

L'‘Euthyphron’ comme évènement communicationnel. What emerges from the discussion of the Platonic way of depicting Socrates' elenctic procedures is at once consonant with Xenophon's representation and apt to provide the framework of all following discussions. To Rossetti, this dialogue may be only apparently inconclusive (he suggests that it could be considered as the last in the aporetic series, or at least having been produced after the *Charmides*). Indeed, a positive conclusion may be looming between the lines, although one of such a radical nature that it had to be made perceptible to the discerning reader only: "piety", in all its conventional senses, is hardly a notion relevant to authentic religious practice. Nevertheless, Rossetti also reads the *Euthyphro* as a test-case for his methodological principle that, in order to grasp the full meaning of a Socratic dialogue, textual pragmatics should be given as much attention and weight as textual semantics. This is a case-story displaying a vast range of Socrates' argumentative tactics. Behind a subdued and usually polite form, Socratic speech is substantially aggressive and eristic: the style of argument aims at coaxing the opponent into submission at least as much as at propelling the extant dialogue towards a purely cognitive goal. Anything Socrates is made to ask, or deny, or refute, or simply wonder about (there being obviously very little by way of explicit assertion in the aporetic dialogues), can be understood as implementing an argumentative strategy whose aim is discursive dominance against the interlocutor. In the end, to push a discussion ahead till it reaches an *aporia* is a cognitive operation; to strive to reach an *aporia* at any cost is a performative operation.

As Rossetti stresses, such Platonic (and not only Platonic) depictions also address their public by means of an implicit «macro-rhétorique» expressly designed to exert a variably covert influence. They push the reader, persistently stimulated to side with Socrates, into admitting Socrates' dialogical dominance as an undisputable, that is permanent, fact. The final *aporia*, therefore, is unlikely to provide some kind of open-ended conclusion: the authorial intention may hardly be to bring the reader to realize that it is now up to him to determine whether, and how, some further attempt at solving the problem should be pursued. It may rather suggest to the reader's mind the thought that, could some solution be designed at all, it might be, conceivably, if not thanks a character like Socrates, then thanks an author like Plato (whether or not Socrates is to be considered as the author's ideological mouthpiece is of course a different question, which Rossetti does not address explicitly). Socrates' intrinsically conative intention in addressing his own interlocutor is functional to Plato's ultimately conative intention in addressing his own reader.

5. The discussion of Socrates' argumentative tactics as one main source of inspiration for Plato's authorial strategy is also expanded in the following three chapters *Le ridicule comme arme entre les mains de Socrate et de ses élèves* (5), *La rhétorique de Socrate* (6) and *Le côté inauthentique du dialoguer platonicien* (7), which highlight the deliberately disingenuous components in Socrates' dialogical activity. Socrates' much trumpeted anti-rhetorical stance is exposed as a rhetorical device in its own merit: Rossetti nicely terms it «la rhétorique de l'antirhétorique». In Rossetti's terminology, Plato systematically implements his 'macro-rhetorical' strategy designed to submit readers to his influence, while at a 'micro-rhetorical level' he consistently forbids his Socrates to exploit the various subterfuges typical of 'sophistic' declamation and argument. To deny the possession and to reject the value of any such capability, as well as to declare a self-conscious ignorance, or to start the discussion in a deferential posture towards the interlocutor's assumed competence, are all moves in Socrates' game; Socratic speech is certainly as much astute and, if need be, devious, tricky or unfair as any 'sophistic' paralogue. Socrates is a master at undermining an attempted definition by means of apposite counter-examples (a procedure, as Rossetti shows, that by itself might not suffice to disprove the assertion it is supposed to invalidate,

and, in some instances, could even bring some sort of confirmation to it); or at inducing his interlocutor to reformulate his views precisely in that form which will render them most vulnerable to objections; or at shifting the terminological focus of the ongoing discussion, so to utterly disorient his opponent, and so on. Even at the very level of inferential reasoning, Socratic procedures are sometimes less than impeccable. One may wonder whether this happens out of purpose, or not. Indeed, Rossetti supposes that Socrates' equivocations, non-sequiturs or outright logical mistakes might occasionally be the author's own: for all his genius, Plato was objectively constrained within the limits of the logical instrumentation available to him. All the same, Socrates is marked as the winner in the dialogical agon, whose manifest superiority is at once of an intellectual and a moral nature. He deserves the reader's unrestricted sympathy and wholesome acquiescence.

Rossetti thus recognizes the extraordinary competence of the *orator summus Plato* (Cicero's words: *de orat.* 1.47). He convincingly stresses the need for the reader to mobilize all available critical faculties against the relentless Platonic attempts to produce some irresistible textual suggestions onto him. By deconstructing the amalgam of hidden conations and explicit arguments which extends its grip both upon Socrates' interlocutors and Plato's public, Rossetti brings a relevant contribution to the line of investigation seeking to disentangle the Socratic interplay between argumentative discourse and dramatic utterance.

Such discussion also sets Socrates apart from the very characters to whom he may have easily been assimilated by his contemporaries, the 'sophists' (with no prejudice of the additional, irretrievable gap created by the systematic derision implemented against the latter by all Socratics). In the immediate, perhaps, confusion may have been excusable: Socrates, while disclaiming and condemning rhetorical sophistication, does indeed produce that rhetorical humiliation of his counterpart which can appear as any sophist's objective. Yet to the sophist this achievement would have been instrumental in order to be recognized as a valuable (in all senses) dispenser of knowledge. To Socrates (who apparently did not ask for fees), this is the so to say technical precondition for developing his overwhelming psychagogical activity. Rossetti's accurate comparison of Socrates' and Gorgias' rhetorical aims and procedures (within Chapter 6), brings to the light an additional divergence: while Gorgias' rhetorical *paignia* content themselves with providing the reader with some immediately non-refutable statements, for all their eristic inflections Socrates' elenctic procedures, by leading to an apparent *aporia* about some fundamental questions, may nevertheless leave the door open to further cognitive developments, and stress how desirable the latter need to be. By the same token, Socrates may bring an interlocutor to revise his entire attitude to life, and come to realize that the only important among his activities must be the care of his own *psyche*. Therefore, the apparently neutral but substantially dangerous claim of the sophist, to be able to teach whatever may be desired, is definitely contrasted by the ultimately beneficial orientation of Socrates' behavior. Which remains nonetheless highly disconcerting, and Rossetti states this ultimate Socratic paradox in Hamlet's words: «I must be cruel in order to be kind».

6. All such analyses seem to refer to 'Socrates' as the literary creature animating the *Sokratikoi logoi*: an image that can be considered as 'semi-fictional' at best. What about historicity, Rossetti's second main focal point? The view seems to prevail nowadays that no amount of intertextual comparison may be able to produce any reliable assessment of the 'historical' Socrates' 'ideas', even less 'doctrines'. Rossetti indeed supposes that the man might have owned no like intellectual possession: whatever Socrates would have put forth, for all his energy and originality, could deserve no more precise denotation than 'attitudes' or 'beliefs'. In the same vein, Rossetti suggests a specific discursive achievement that the

'real' Socrates may *not* have reached (and maybe never intended to): that is, systematically elaborated and cognitively satisfactory definitions. True, the character 'Socrates' seems given to ask the 'What-is question', according to Plato and (with a markedly different orientation) Xenophon (cf *Mem.* 1.1.16, 4.6.1 ff., and also 3.8, quoted above), to whom Rossetti adds various other Socratics, like Aeschines of Sphettos, Phaedo and Euclides; and Aristotle names 'definition' as Socrates' distinctive contribution to philosophy. Yet Rossetti would rather believe that the responsibility for Aristotle's assessment, and for the comprehensive image of a 'definitional Socrates', must ultimately fall on Plato alone (especially as the author of the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*). But in all other cases the use of the 'What-is question' appears to be less aimed at establishing a universally valid definition than at throwing Socrates' dialogical counterpart into psychological turmoil and thus into radical self-questioning.

All this being said, Rossetti points to one fundamental coincidence emerging, not only from Plato's and Xenophon's dramatic representations, but also from those of other contemporary Socratic authors as well (notably Aeschines): the aggressive orientation of Socrates' dialogical behavior, and its instrumental function. What Socrates aims at, when inflicting his *elenchus* to some given interlocutor (or victim), is finally not just to prove, or disprove, some given assertion, but also to impose his own superiority upon his counterpart in such a way as to force the latter into acknowledging the overall inadequacy of the notions, beliefs and values it has been holding up to now. Such a psychological shock will either scare the antagonist away, eventually in a fury (a dialogical outcome Rossetti does not discuss explicitly); or cause him to submit once and for all to Socrates' direction in the attempt to remodel his own personality as a whole. The pitiless Socratic *exetasis* thus joins hands with the compassionate Socratic *parainesis*. Rossetti argues that no author of Socratic dialogues, whatever his personal perception of Socrates and his individual strategy in construing the character bearing the same name, could have discarded this most idiosyncratic of all features exhibited by the 'historical' Socrates: the constant propensity to win an argument at all costs, not merely in order to achieve a rhetorical triumph (in this case, Socrates would have been just one sophist among many others), but in order to penetrate deep into the *psyche* of his opponent and to provide the latter with the longing for a radical reshaping of his very self. This is why the character 'Socrates' is consistently and universally being described as the masterly practitioner of a kind of dialogue which systematically submits his interlocutor to *elenchus* and *exetazein*. Such representation, Rossetti underlines, indeed constitutes the 'hard core' of the wholesome literary production recreating Socratic dialogue: not even Xenophon, with all his apparent lack of consideration for the *elenchus* as a component of the Socratic rhetorical panoply, could avoid to give two different instances of it. He additionally notes that no other contemporary literary character is being defined by such features (the comparison of Socrates to the 'sophists' supports this remark).

All such representations need therefore to be considered as factually accurate, so Rossetti concludes (the magnitude and precision of all depictions would apparently neutralize the possible objection that textual concordance about a given datum may not necessarily imply actual reality of the same). Indeed, this could bring a welcome clarification of the 'Socratic question' itself: the ideological reality of the 'historical' Socrates is out of reach, the reality of his dialogical manners may still be knowable. Never mind the actual words this Socrates may have spoken: what we may grasp is *how*, and to which performative purposes, he kept speaking them all his life.

Stefano Jedrkiewicz
stefanojedrkiewicz@gmail.com