

## PROLOGUE

*The Future of the Past in Plato's Work*

In recounting the story of Plato's life, Olympiodorus, a professor of philosophy in Alexandria in Egypt in the sixth century AD, told his students this anecdote:

Having been loved by many and helped many, Plato, when he was dying, saw himself in a dream as a swan, moving from tree to tree, thus giving much trouble to the hunters. Simmias the Socratic interpreted the dream in this way: Plato [could not] be caught by those who came after him and wished to interpret him. For interpreters who try to capture the thoughts of the ancients are like hunters. But Plato cannot be caught, for one can understand him in a physical, ethical or theological way, in short in very many ways, just like Homer. For the souls of both [Homer and Plato], it is said, contain all harmonies. So it is possible to understand them in all sorts of ways.<sup>1</sup>

The swan was associated in ancient Greece with the god Apollo, a god with whom philosophers also were associated. It was Apollo's oracle at Delphi, for example, which encouraged Socrates in his philosophical quest. Swans appear in many stories about Plato's life, but in this story a swan serves to show how Plato's writings, after his death, became the object of interpretation: Plato's interpreters are hunters of swans.<sup>2</sup> The story tells us that the interpreters never succeed in capturing the swan: there will be many interpretations of Plato's writings and none will be final. The swan will never be caught.

This story can lead us to formulate two questions:

- (1) Why do Plato's writings call for *interpretation*, and call for it unceasingly?
- (2) Why do Plato's writings provoke a *multiplicity* of interpretations, never definitive, never final?

<sup>1</sup> Olympiodorus *In Alcib.* 2, 155–65 (my trans.). Part of this passage is quoted by Tigerstedt (1977), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Swans were hunted and eaten in antiquity.

Olympiodorus, in the passage quoted here, reports Simmias the Socratic's answer to the second question. Simmias, a young friend of Socrates who is present while Socrates awaits his death in Plato's *Phaedo*, thought, supposedly, that it was because Plato's soul contains all harmonies and so his writings can be read in many ways.<sup>3</sup> I will not attempt to examine Simmias' answer, for this would involve us in difficult discussions about the constitution of Plato's soul! Rather, on the threshold to a reading of Plato's later works, I would like to propose answers to the two questions formulated here to the extent that these questions concern Plato's *writings*. No attempt will be made to show the obvious: that Plato will always be interesting and intriguing. Rather, what I wish to discuss is the following: *what is it* in Plato's writings that creates the need to interpret them, and to interpret them in ever-renewed ways? What is it, in this work, a work which belongs to the past, which allows it to carry with itself its future? To deal with these matters, I would like to follow three paths.

### 1 Three Temporalities in Plato

A first path is indicated by the literary structure of Plato's writings. A start may be made on this path by recalling some well-known facts. Plato, we know, wrote his texts as if they were scenarios, dramatic scenes of dialogues usually between Socrates and his contemporaries or of exchanges of speeches between them. We also recall that Plato himself is absent from these scenarios: he is never one of the figures in the play, even if, sometimes, we might feel his presence in the wings. We are also aware that if we read Plato's dialogues, we become involved as readers in the dialogue, as if we were actually present to it, as if we had become members of it, and are provoked by it to think, to dialogue in our minds, to react.

One might draw attention to the following particular feature of this complex literary situation. The situation involves what we might call different temporalities, or times:

**T 1:** the time in the past when the scenario is supposed to be taking place, the time of Socrates' discussion with others, what is usually called the 'dramatic date' of the dialogue;

<sup>3</sup> Simmias appears, according to this late report, to be applying the theory of the mathematical structure of the soul of Plato's *Timaeus* (see Chapter 4, section 3) to Plato himself. Various works were attributed to Simmias in later antiquity, including a work on music (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, 2, 124).

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- T 2:** the time when the text was actually written by Plato, Plato's present as he was writing the text, the date of composition of the work;
- T 3:** the time when the reader reads the text. This time is the present of the reader and may be any time between the time when Plato's contemporaries first read his texts up to *our* present, as we read Plato now.

One might describe the relations between these three temporalities<sup>4</sup> as follows.

Even if **T 2** is the same as **T 3**, that is, even if the reader reads the text just when Plato wrote and published it, **T 1** is already in the past, as compared to the present of **T 2/T 3**. The past, we might say, is *written into* the text. But this past is brought by the text into relation with the present of the reader, to the extent that the reader becomes involved in the dialogue *as if* it were the reader's present. The reader then becomes part of a system of relations. The present time of the reader – the reader's cultural milieu, experience, interests – becomes part of the system of relations and affects it correspondingly. Since the present time is the future of the past, and since the present time of the reader is the present of any future, Plato has integrated the future into the texture of his work. And since the present time of potential readers is multiple and open, so is the text in its interpretations open. In their very past, Plato's works provoke our present, as his readers, and the variety of our presents gives a corresponding variety of interpretations.

However, might one not say this is true of *any* text portraying the past and read by later readers? For example, Thucydides, in his history, or Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, in their tragedies, recount the past, including the mythical past, in a way which would not have failed to appeal indirectly to the preoccupations of their contemporaries (and ours). The system of relations I have sketched here is not unique, then, to Plato's work.

But it need not be and we need not claim any exclusivity for him in this respect. Yet among the various ways in which texts recounting the past can provoke our interest, Plato's writings, by including the future reader as an

<sup>4</sup> Further temporalities might be discerned in dialogues where the main conversation with Socrates is reported within other, later conversations (as in the *Phaedo*, or in the *Symposium*, the *Parmenides* and the *Theaetetus*). But I think that these further temporalities have to do especially with the fictionality of the dialogue involving Socrates (**T 1**), whose literary plausibility is constructed by the intermediate stages when it was reported and through which it supposedly can reach us. On this question, see Johnson (1998). On the fictional transmission through stages of the story of Atlantis in the *Timaeus*, see Chapter 1, section 3.

(albeit silent) interlocutor and participant in philosophical enquiry, are uniquely effective in provoking the reader to *philosophize*, at any time. Plato's writings can be said to be dramas (dramas directly taking place, or dramas reported by others),<sup>5</sup> but they are dramas in which *we* as readers are invited to join the *dramatis personae* in philosophizing, to think about problems Plato situates in the past as they affect us in our present and call us to respond.

One might take some concrete examples in order to see how this open system of relations, with the wide interpretative possibilities it allows, actually works. My choice of examples is not intended to be systematic or final: the analysis could well be extended to other dialogues of Plato.

Chronological chart<sup>6</sup>

|                   | Dramatic date<br>(T 1) | Date of<br>composition (T 2) | Date of reading<br>(T 3) |
|-------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Phaedo</i>     | 399 BC                 | ca. 383                      | ca. 383 → ...            |
| <i>Republic</i>   | ca. 412                | 370s                         | 370s → ...               |
| <i>Parmenides</i> | ca. 450                | after 370                    | after 370 → ...          |
| <i>Timaeus</i>    | late 430s              | 360s                         | 360s → ...               |

As a first example we might take Plato's *Phaedo*. The *Phaedo* represents a discussion which Socrates is portrayed as having with his friends (including Simmias) on the day of his death. The dramatic date of the dialogue (T 1) is therefore 399 BC. It is probable that Plato wrote the *Phaedo* (T 2) around 383, about twenty years after the death of Socrates.<sup>7</sup> There is thus a distance of about twenty years between T 1 and T 2, a difference of one generation. Let us suppose now that T 2 is T 3, that we are reading the text when Plato first published it. What had happened since the time of Socrates' death? Athens had continued to attempt to recover from the losses suffered in its defeat in the war with Sparta. Plato himself had gone to Sicily, met Pythagoreans there, returned to Athens in 387 and founded the Academy. The *Phaedo* was written probably not long after. How, then, does what Socrates says on his last day appear to us in the retrospective light of this present time (if T 2 = T 3)? In the *Phaedo*, on the day of his death, Socrates exhorts us to have confidence in reasoning (*logos*), not to despair of

<sup>5</sup> See Erler (2007), 71–5, for a survey of this theme.

<sup>6</sup> The dramatic and compositional dates of Plato's works are much debated in some cases. For a review of dramatic dates, see Nails (2002), 307–30, and, for compositional dates, see Ledger (1989), 224–5.

<sup>7</sup> See Dixsaut (1991), 28.

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the value of argumentation. For knowledge is the goal of the philosopher who will lead a good and admirable life, like the philosophical life exemplified by Socrates on his last day. In a curious way, these ideas, if seen in relation to **T 2/T 3**, provide support for the present work of Plato's newly founded Academy. The meaning and value of the philosophical work begun in Plato's Academy receive strong support from what Socrates tells us, speaking to us from the past. Plato, of course, does not refer explicitly in the *Phaedo* to the Academy, and what Socrates says can have a wider application. If **T 3** is not **T 2**, if our present as readers of the *Phaedo* is distant from Plato's present, as founder of the Academy, we can also think again, as we read the *Phaedo*, about what we want to do, and why, in *our* academies, why knowledge is important to us and how it relates to a good life for humans. As **T 3** is open-ended and can be the present of any future reader, the past of Socrates can speak to any future, as long as there are humans who can read Plato.

A second example might be provided by Plato's *Republic*. Here, as regards **T 1**, Socrates is younger, in his forties or fifties (he was seventy when he died).<sup>8</sup> The *Republic* was written by Plato (**T 2**) after the *Phaedo*, perhaps somewhere around 380 or later, in the 370s. This gives us a greater distance between **T 1** and **T 2**, perhaps a gap of about forty to fifty years, two generations. **T 1** is situated in the past of Athens, almost a decade (or perhaps more) before its defeat in 404 BC in the catastrophic war with Sparta, a past which is now (**T 2**) long gone, a distant memory. The Academy now is well established and successful in its endeavours. What does Socrates recommend to us in the *Republic*? He imagines (two generations before the Academy) a project for an ideal system of the sciences and of education. He speaks of a utopia which is based on scientific knowledge put in the service of the human good. We can suppose that all of this would have surprised and amused the members (**T 2**) of Plato's Academy. Imagine! Socrates, a long time ago, already saw the Academy! But the considerable temporal distance Plato put between the time when Socrates is supposed to be speaking (**T 1**) and Plato's present (**T 2**) has its importance, I think. Putting what Socrates says in a distant past has the effect of making this something far removed, not immediately present, describing projects which have not now been fulfilled and are not to be attempted, as such, right now, but which indicate, in their past, what

<sup>8</sup> In the chronological chart proposed earlier, 412 is given as the **T 1** of the *Republic*, a date which is proposed by Notomi (2010). Others have argued for an earlier date for **T 1**; for a survey, see Nails (2002), 324–6.

could be aimed at and reached in a possible future, in relation to which present efforts can be orientated.<sup>9</sup> This applies, I would suggest, not only to Plato's first readers, when they read the *Republic*, but also to us now, his present readers, and to his readers of the future.

A third example might be Plato's *Parmenides*. Here Socrates has become *much* younger. Plato insists, in the scenario, on just how young Socrates is by comparing his youth and immaturity with the old age and maturity of his partner in the discussion, Parmenides. If Plato wrote the *Parmenides* after about 370, as seems likely, then a very long gap in time separates **T 1** from **T 2**, about eighty years, almost four generations. For the first readers of the *Parmenides* (**T 2** = **T 3**), the effect of this gap must have been startling. For there, in the dialogue, in a discussion between the young Socrates and the old Parmenides, a very long time ago, difficult metaphysical problems were discussed which were actually, in the present (**T 2**), being hotly debated in Plato's Academy (perhaps Aristotle was already there as a young student).<sup>10</sup> This technique of consigning to a very distant past debates actually taking place at present has the effect, I would like to suggest, of allowing the reader to take some distance, to detach and free herself or himself from the immediate present, opening the debate to new perspectives. Even today, when we are so far from such debates, when **T 3** is so far from **T 2**, we can still be fascinated by the text and cannot but read it in relation to our present metaphysical interests.

A last example might be provided by Plato's *Timaeus*. Here also, the time gap between the time of the scenario and the time of composition, between **T 1** and **T 2**, is very great, about as great as in the *Parmenides*, perhaps nearly seventy years.<sup>11</sup> And within the text Plato creates an even greater distance in telling how a figure in the discussion, Critias, could recount the long-forgotten story about the war between Athens and Atlantis. This story is so old that the Athenians (**T 1** and **T 2**) have forgotten it entirely (*Timaeus* 21d, 23b). Only the Egyptians, thanks to their ancient records, kept its memory and could tell it to Solon, the source of Critias' story. The story is about the heroic deeds of a good city, similar to the utopia of Plato's *Republic*. Through the story, the utopia is projected back into a distant past, beyond the limits of the history that Athenians knew. And this very distant past is itself introduced by a speech, given by

<sup>9</sup> Notomi (2010), 117, comments: 'The *Republic* shows the tension between the hope of realizing the best possible city in the time of Socrates (412 BC) and the difficulty of changing the severe reality in Plato's maturity (the 370s BC).'

<sup>10</sup> For a possible resonance of the *Statesman* with the Academy, see Chapter 5, n. 2.

<sup>11</sup> For the **T 1** of the *Timaeus*, see Chapter 1, n. 19.

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the figure Timaeus, about the beginning of the world. We leave here the realm of human history, Athenian or even Egyptian, and find the birth of cosmic order, which no human could have witnessed, a cosmic order which would inspire the long-forgotten ancient Athenians, victors of Atlantis, to create a good state and live a good and virtuous life. In this mythical past, the real Athenians of the present (T 2), whose more recent history rather resembles that of Atlantis and its destruction, could imagine another Athens, a good city, as a promise in a hypothetical, distant future.<sup>12</sup> And we, today, even further removed from the mythical past than Socrates' and Plato's contemporaries, can also try to imagine what it would be like for human society to live in harmony with the world and with nature.

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A second path might be followed in describing how Plato built the future into the past, how his works are written so as to call for interpretation and interpretations that are never final. This path might be made somewhat shorter than the first path. It has to do, not with the particular literary structure of Plato's writings, but with the ways in which he portrays Socrates in these writings. At first, probably, Plato wanted to preserve in writing the memory of Socrates after Socrates had died. But Socrates stays on as a figure throughout Plato's long career as a writer, and it seems as if the figure of Socrates evolves with the evolution of Plato's thinking, as if Plato never ceased to think about the reasons for Socrates' life, his action and his death.

It is precisely this continuing, evolving presence of Socrates in Plato's writings that creates a tension between what we may suppose was the historical reality of Socrates, what he actually was,<sup>13</sup> and his changing appearances in Plato's writings, appearances changing with Plato's preoccupations. We have already seen examples of this tension, when Socrates appears to foresee the founding and the work of the Academy. Of course there is not only the tension which Plato creates between Socrates at T 1 and Socrates as anticipating T 2; there is also the tension between these and the Socrates of much later readers (T 3), the Socrates of Nietzsche, of Kierkegaard, of Plato's readers today. Decidedly belonging to a past long gone, Socrates also speaks to the reader's present and acts as a challenge for the future.

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 1, section 4. <sup>13</sup> On this, see Kleve (1987), 123–37.

The tensions which Plato creates, with the figure of Socrates, our doubts about the historical reality of Plato's Socrates are symptomatic, I believe, of Socrates' role in Plato as a figure of the past announcing the future. I would like to note two aspects of this symptomatic doubt:

- (i) In Plato, Socrates is sometimes a hero who is almost too perfect: he shows, in Plato's *Apology*, complete integrity, courage, freedom without compromise, responsibility for himself and for others, a life completely given to self-examination. But how could such a man really have existed? Is this figure not rather an appeal to us in the imperfection of our present, a call for a better future?
- (ii) Yet Socrates, in Plato's dialogues, can sometimes appear, in some dialogues, to be a complex, problematic figure. He can give the impression of cheating in arguing with others. He says that he knows nothing, but seems to know enough to be very sure about himself, about what he is doing and why he is doing it, to the point of dying for it. He presupposes a number of claims, in particular claims about what it takes to lead a good life. These apparent presuppositions worry us (after all, we are Socrates' children), drive us to think about them, and to think, through them, about our own life ideals, in their assumptions.

Under both aspects, Socrates is a part of the past, conjured up by Plato as a figure of a possible future to our present. Socrates is Plato become a swan!

### 3 Plato's Open Philosophy

It might suffice here for the moment to signal, very briefly, a third path, by means of some general remarks about the ways in which Plato presents his ideas about philosophical method and his doctrines, since, in the following chapters, we will be examining these matters in much more detail. Philosophical methods and doctrines, as Plato presents them in his works, can have the character of a past which opens the way to the future. They are presented by him often as sketches, projects, to be rethought and reshaped by the reader in his or her present. In this sense Plato's philosophizing is 'open'.<sup>14</sup> Let us take first what Plato tells us about philosophical method.

<sup>14</sup> Clay (1988), 19–24, describes the *Republic* as an 'open dialogue'; see also Erler (2007), 87 ('Offenheit der Dialoge'), with further references.

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Plato indicates in his works that the method he applies and follows is provisional, inadequate, compared to what would be the best method.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, the results of an exploration conducted by means of such an imperfect method can only be provisional. They await, in their provisional past, a more adequate future. And when Plato tells us what an ideal method might be like, he leaves his account very open. For example, when Plato writes about the highest kind of knowledge at the end of *Republic* Book VI, what he calls 'dialectic' (511bc), he leaves the sketch he gives of it very incomplete, imprecise, seemingly vague, so much so that we have great difficulty if we try to find out exactly how dialectic works. I think this lack of precision, this vagueness in Plato, is not proof that Plato is an imprecise and confused thinker. The vagueness is an openness to the future, to what could be a perfect method permitting the systematic, unified and complete organization of knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Plato's vagueness is the vagueness of our future, of our expectations in regard to scientific method.

When we turn to the doctrines we find in Plato's works, we find here too, I believe, that they carry the mark of a past which speaks to the future. Thus, for example, the political utopias which Plato sketches in the *Republic* and the *Laws* are not, I believe, intended to be concrete plans to be realized in the here and now. Rather they are projects to be interpreted and modulated in relation to different times and places, the result being, in each case, different. The utopia of the *Republic* appears again in the *Timaeus* as an ancient and long-forgotten Athens, situated in a mythic past prefiguring what could be in a distant future, some time very far from the present reality of Socrates' Athens. The good city elaborated in Plato's *Laws* is also born, in the discussion, in a quasi-legendary atmosphere, far from Athens, in Crete. Socrates is not there, but a citizen of Athena's city (*Laws* 626d), Socrates' city, is. It is clearly indicated that the good city of the *Laws* is not to be realized as such (746bc): it requires adaptation, changes, in relation to particular circumstances.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, if we come to Plato's most famous (or notorious) doctrine, his metaphysical 'Theory of Forms', or, as it is sometimes called, the 'Theory of Ideas', here also we struggle with lack of precision, vagueness, incompleteness, when we try to find out what exactly these 'Forms' or 'Ideas' are. Here, I think, it would be a mistake to think that Plato has an established, definitive doctrine. Rather, Plato is giving us pointers<sup>18</sup> to what *would* be

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, *Phaedo* 107b, *Republic* 435d, 504bd, *Timaeus* 48cd; Ferber (2007), 25–7, 32–41.

<sup>16</sup> See Ferber (2007), 25–7. <sup>17</sup> I return to these themes in more detail in Chapter 6.

<sup>18</sup> See Ferber (2007), 63–4.

the content of a true knowledge of things. What are these pointers? What expectations do they express regarding such a knowledge?

Here I must be very brief. A fuller treatment will require a journey, a rather long journey. However, anticipating what could be found on such a journey,<sup>19</sup> I believe one can say that Plato's Forms or Ideas point us to the possibility of a knowledge of the functional laws allowing every and any complex entity, be it a soul, a city-state or the world, to function harmoniously, efficiently, in a way beneficial to all of its parts and to the whole. In a political system this means knowledge of the laws allowing a society to live in peace for the good of each and every part of the society, without exploitation of one part of society by another part, a society where the causes of evil and of war are reduced to a minimum. This, I propose, is what Plato's swan sings to us.

<sup>19</sup> See Chapters 3 and 4.