

HOW TO READ A PLATONIC DIALOGUE

Dylan Futter (University of the Witwatersrand)

In this essay, I explain and clarify Jacob Klein's significant yet difficult account of how to read a Platonic dialogue. I argue that Klein takes Plato's dialogues to be discursively incomplete dramas that the audience is asked to make whole by its participation. A Platonic dialogue thus comes into being only when readers or auditors examine the arguments and themselves.

Keywords: Plato; Socrates; Jacob Klein; dialogue; Socratic irony

Introduction

In a note to his translation of the *Theaetetus*, Joe Sachs says that Jacob Klein has written the best introduction to the 'dramatic aspects of a Platonic dialogue'.¹ High praise, certainly, and deserved, I believe: Klein's account is unusually perceptive. Yet there is this problem: his introduction is not very introductory and seems to require an introduction all of its own. In this article, I wish to present something of that business; by so doing, I hope to vindicate Sachs and, *inshallah*, render a service to those who are coming to Plato for the first or the umpteenth time.

The dialogue as drama

Klein starts from the premise that the Platonic dialogue is not a book 'claiming to speak for itself'.² It is 'not a treatise or the text of a lecture' that advances propositions for belief.³ The dialogue actively suppresses the authorial voice. Plato's books do not put forward any claims as true and worthy of acceptance.

Klein connects this premise to the idea that the dialogues are dramas,⁴ a view which finds its basis in Aristotle, who, in his *Poetics*, describes the Socratic dialogue as a nameless art 'which imitates by language alone, without harmony, in prose...'.⁵ On this reckoning, the Platonic writings are dramas without music and metre. Similar claims are repeated in the subsequent doxological traditions.⁶

¹ Sachs 2004:4. Sachs refers specifically to pp. 3–10 of the 1965 edition of Klein's *A Commentary on Plato's Meno*. In this paper, I will be using the 1989 University of Chicago Press edition of the same commentary.

² Klein 1989:3.

³ Klein 1985:309.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Arist. *Poet.* 1447b9–11.

⁶ Klein refers to DL 3.18 and Ath. 11.504b, 14.620–622d.

Klein's interpretation is thus far in keeping with some traditions of scholarship.⁷ The originality of his view comes to light in his account of what it means to 'cope with' the 'dramatic quality' of Plato's writings.⁸ For Klein, audience participation is necessary for the coming-into-being of the drama;⁹ the activity of readers or listeners completes the work and makes it whole: 'We are one of the elements of the dialogue and perhaps the most important one'.¹⁰

At one level, Klein's point is familiar. The success of a tragedy, say, depends on the activity of an audience whose job it is to watch, listen, and follow the unfolding of the tragic plot with appropriate emotions.¹¹ A tragedy succeeds as a tragedy only when it elicits such activity and response. The failure of Phrynichus's *Fall of Miletus*, which so 'harrowed' its audience,¹² confirms this point negatively. The Athenians 'could not attend to *The Fall*' because of their closeness to its events.¹³ The tragedy failed as a tragedy because the audience could not play its part.

At a deeper level, though, Klein's point is that Plato's readers or listeners are essential parts of the dialogue.¹⁴ Setting himself in opposition to René Schaefer, for whom 'the discussion is not intended for [the audience but] has its own justification within itself',¹⁵ Klein insists that Plato's dialogues '[presuppose] people listening to the conversation not as casual and indifferent spectators, but as silent participants'.¹⁶

Klein defends his claim that the dialogues position the audience inside the drama by an appeal to their form.¹⁷ Plato's indirect or narrated dialogues cannot be

⁷ Klein refers especially to Friedrich Schleiermacher, e.g., *Platon's Werke*, 1st ed., 1804–1810.

⁸ Klein 1989:4–5.

⁹ *Ibid.* 7–9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 9.

¹¹ See Arist. *Poet.* 1449b27.

¹² See Hdt. 6.21 and the Editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica 2008.

¹³ Shelley 2022 section 2.3.

¹⁴ It is not certain whether Plato's dialogues were originally intended for stage production, and, if so, what this might have involved; see Blondell 2002:22–25. It is clear that, unlike the plays of Sophocles, say, for which there may have been no original script, the Platonic dialogues are written works. If the dialogues were not written for the stage, it might be that they were written for performances of a different kind, such as reading aloud. In any case, the key claim for present purposes is that the role of present-day readers as 'participants in the dialogue is fundamentally not different from that of Plato's own contemporaries' (Klein 1989:9). I use the phrases 'reader or listener', 'audience', and cognates to register these possibilities without taking a firm position on the dialogues' mode of performance.

¹⁵ Klein 1989:6. See Schaefer 1938. As Klein (1989:7 n.19) points out, Schaefer is not wholly consistent on this point since he refers to Plato's attempt to 'provoke an impulse of dissatisfaction in the soul of the reader'.

¹⁶ Klein 1989:6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

understood, he suggests, without ‘envisaging a circle of listeners gathered about [Socrates]’,¹⁸ amongst whom we ourselves are counted. For example, in the *Republic*, Socrates tells the story of his all-night conversation about justice to a nameless audience (327a). The reported speech enables him to communicate the content of that discussion directly to us.¹⁹ To be sure, the audience is not explicitly addressed in the direct or performed dialogues; yet in these cases, Klein insists, we are still observers and participants—and now the only ones, for not even the cicadas are permitted (see *Phdr.* 259a–d).²⁰

Irony and incompleteness

A key question for Klein is what it means for auditors or readers to be part of the Platonic dialogue. How do they come to be involved in the discussion that it presents? Klein’s answer to this question appeals to Socrates’ ironic way of speaking and acting. Irony is, as I understand him, the bond by which audience and text come to be joined together in one work of philosophical art.

According to Klein, ‘for a statement or [an action] to be ironical there must be someone capable of understanding that it is ironical’.²¹ Since ‘irony [is] the prevailing mode in which Socrates speaks and acts’,²² his behaviour presupposes the existence of an audience which can grasp his irony. ‘Everything about [his] irony depends on the presence of other people who are capable of catching [it], of hearing what is not said’.²³

On Klein’s interpretation, then, Plato writes Socrates as an ironist. And Socrates uses irony to speak to multiple auditors at the same time. At one level, his statement, question, or argument is addressed to the interlocutors. At another, his speech is directed to members of the circle of listeners who form ‘a living hedge’ around the discussants.²⁴ When Socrates talks to his interlocutor, he leaves something unsaid. In this, he speaks over the head of his interlocutor and to his audience, that is, to us. By grasping Socrates’ irony, therefore, we bring his ironic speech acts to completion.

¹⁸ Klein 1989:6 is quoting R. Hirzel, *Der Dialog*, 1895:212 n.1.

¹⁹ See Miller 2007:311.

²⁰ Klein 1989:6.

²¹ *Ibid.* 5, italics removed. Klein entertains the idea of a ‘self-possessed person’ who is both ironist and appreciator of his irony. But this description does not apply to Socrates, he insists, for the latter is not ‘ironical to satisfy himself’ (*ibid.* 6).

²² *Ibid.* 5.

²³ *Ibid.* 6.

²⁴ Schaerer 1938:144 as quoted in Klein 1989:6.

As an example of Socrates' use of irony, I refer to an exchange that occurs in the *Laches*. When that 'bluff old soldier',²⁵ Laches, gives an account of courage that excludes the possibility of courage in retreat (191a), the attentive reader remembers that he had earlier praised Socrates for exhibiting exactly this kind of courage (181a–b). The son of Phaenarete draws attention to this omission with a series of questions (191a–c); in this, he seeks to get the audience to notice two things: first, the applicability of this kind of courage to the question of what courage is, and, secondly, that Laches has forgotten what he knows. Socrates' ironic questioning invites the reader or auditor to recognise what Laches does not, and to recognise that he does not make this connection.

The function of Socrates' irony can be compared to the effect of the parabasis in Old Attic Comedy, when 'the characters seem to leap out of their fictional confines ... to address their audience directly'.²⁶ Their invocation breaks the boundary between the world of the drama and the 'real world': the question inside the play comes to be a question outside the play.²⁷ Socrates' irony draws flesh-and-blood auditors into the world of the drama in a similar way. Yet, unlike the parabasis in one of Aristophanes' comedies, his irony is not a direct confrontation, but an understatement or omission that they, or we, are invited to recognise. The audience activity that completes the dialogue consists in part of attention to, and understanding of, Socrates' 'veiled way of speaking'.²⁸

None of this is to say that Plato's dialogues are void of "doctrinal" assertions'.²⁹ They contain arguments, many of which seek to express the so-called Socratic paradoxes—virtue is knowledge, nobody does wrong willingly, and so on. These 'paradoxes' do not merely contradict common opinion and thus have the appearance of falsity. Going somewhat beyond Klein's explicit remarks, we can say that they are oracular in that the truth that they express is initially hidden from view and cannot be grasped without activity on the part of listeners or readers. That is how oracles work. An oracle is given to, and about, somebody. It seems strange and inapplicable, and she rejects it out of hand. Then experience changes her, and, in the course of this encounter, the meaning and truth of the oracle starts to dawn. Here we see one of the reasons why the audience cannot be passive: participative activity is necessary for becoming capable of understanding the truth expressed by the Socratic arguments. In the next section, I attempt to describe the character of this activity in more detail.

²⁵ Allen 1996:50.

²⁶ Nehamas 1998:92.

²⁷ See Futter 2015:254.

²⁸ Klein 1989:17.

²⁹ Klein 1989:9.

Examining oneself and the logos

On Klein's account, Plato's dialogues are discursively incomplete works of drama that the audience is asked to make whole by its participation. The dialogue's unfinishedness is in large measure due to Socrates' irony: his utterances hang in the air, as it were, inviting the reader or listener to complete the act of communication by grasping what remains unsaid or hidden from view. In this way, Socrates' irony draws the readers into the drama, as a part of it, and imposes upon them a demand for action.

But now there is this question: what, if anything, are members of the audience asked to do in response to Socrates' ironic speech? Beyond paying attention and attempting to grasp the irony, what kind of action is demanded of us?³⁰ Klein's answer is that 'we, the readers, are being implicitly questioned and examined'.³¹ We must 'weigh Socrates' irony', 'are compelled to admit to ourselves our ignorance'; 'it is up to us to get out of the impasse and to reach a conclusion, if it is reachable at all'.³²

At one level, Klein's account of audience activity seems almost tautological. However, it is critical that demands for self-knowledge and self-examination not be understood 'from the outside', as matters of doctrine, of thoughtless adherence and self-certainty.³³ Participation in a discussion depends on know-how, that is, the ability to examine arguments and oneself. Yet this ability is not something that can be communicated directly and by means of sentences such as 'admit your ignorance'. How then do we learn how to 'weigh', 'question', and 'examine'? Such difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that Plato's dialogues are books. What, after all, does it mean to participate in a book?³⁴

In answering these questions, Klein turns to Plato's critique of writing as given in the *Phaedrus*. Here the character of Socrates seems to insist on the primacy of oral forms of communication. Philosophical teaching, he suggests, must take place in a direct personal encounter with another soul. One of Socrates' reasons for thinking this is that effective teaching requires adaptability (*Phdr.* 275e; 277d8ff.). Not everybody comes to the dialogue from the same place; we all have our 'priors'. Sensitivity to starting points, to beginnings, is necessary for true communication and teaching to take place. The trouble with books is that they cannot adapt themselves

³⁰ See Nehamas 1998:44 for the claim that Plato uses 'Socratic irony as a means for lulling the dialogues' readers into the very self-complacency it makes them denounce'.

³¹ Klein 1989:8.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.* 10ff.

to the character of the reader. They say the same thing to everyone in the same way. For this reason, ‘a written text is necessarily incomplete and cannot teach properly’.³⁵

Now, while the historical Socrates did not write, Plato did. And the Socrates who presents the critique of writing in *Phaedrus* is not himself of flesh and blood—he is a written character. For these reasons, we cannot take his critique of writing at face value. Plato’s dialogues must be attempts to create books in which the defects of the written word are bypassed or diminished. We infer that they do not say the same thing to everybody: they are, or attempt to be, sensitive to different kinds of readers. Klein’s account of auditor self-examination can, I believe, be filled out by considering how this might work. By paying attention to the way in which the written dialogue imitates Socrates’ method of teaching, we shall better understand the activity demanded of participants.

The Platonic dialogue moves at two levels simultaneously: the level of what is said and the level of what is done.³⁶ The *logos* has both a discursive and a mimetic function—it carries the argument and expresses the character of the one who speaks and acts. By ‘argument’, Klein refers to the topic or question under discussion or the chain of reasoning that structures it.³⁷ This chain of reasoning is usually *ad hominem*, for it is ‘dictated by the exigencies of *psychagogia*, in accordance with the (unwritten) rules of a genuine rhetorical art’.³⁸ In short, Socrates’ arguments are particularised by being directed to, not impersonal reason, but a soul of a certain constitution.³⁹

By the mimetic function of the *logos*, Klein refers to the way in which Plato’s words, written on a page or wax tablet, ‘imitate’ the voices and acts of different personae. Most dialogues imitate Socrates and his interlocutors in character and thought.⁴⁰ For example, the *logos* presents Socrates talking—making jokes, telling stories and myths. We also notice when he does not speak. And we ‘see’ him act—going to a festival, walking in the river Ilisus, and drinking from a poisoned cup. Yet Socrates’ greatest deed as presented in the dialogues is the action of *psychagogia*, his leading of souls in discourse.⁴¹

³⁵ *Ibid.* 11.

³⁶ Klein 1989:18.

³⁷ For Klein’s use of argument in the first sense, see his comments on the *Charmides*: Critias ‘accuses Socrates of merely trying to refute him, while neglecting the very thing the *argument*, the *logos*, is about’ (1989:24, emphasis added). In this context, the term ‘argument’ seems to refer to subject matter for discussion, not the chain of reasoning that might constitute it.

³⁸ Klein 1989:27.

³⁹ As Klein point out, ‘the conversation is never completely detached from its mimetic complement’ (1989:27). I return to this point below.

⁴⁰ Arist. *Poet.* 1149b37.

⁴¹ This claim collapses the distinction between word and deed. Socrates’ central *ergon* is using *logoi* to improve the soul of the interlocutor.

Plato's mimetic *logoi* also show the souls of those individuals with whom Socrates converses. His artistry enables us to 'see' and hear the way that they respond to Socrates' arguments; we perceive what they say and do not say, remember, and forget; what they get angry about, feel pleased by, and, crucially, what they do—running away or waiting around, drinking wine, or calling upon others for help. For example, in the *Republic*, Socrates says of Thrasymachus: 'He coiled himself up like a wild beast about to spring, and he hurled himself at us as if to tear us to pieces' (336b). Other words communicate philosophical content. Thus, Thrasymachus says, or perhaps, shouts: 'Justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger' (338c). The words on the page conjure an image of a man putting forward a claim in speech. They cause us to see and hear things in the theatre of our mind.

Now, the question at hand is what the reader or auditor must do to play his part in a Platonic dialogue. What is it that constitutes the activity that makes it whole? As we have seen, the generic answer to this question, *viz.* 'examine the arguments and ourselves' is both true and uninformative—for what does such examination consist in? Is there a way of communicating this knowledge of how to examine by developing the requisite ability in the audience? This is, I believe, the primary function of Klein's remarks on Plato's dialogues—and, of course, his subsequent commentary which seeks to carry out those instructions. By these means, he tries to help the reader notice what she is supposed to notice by drawing attention to certain features of the discursive and the mimetic *logos*, and the interplay between them. In this way, Klein teaches what he has learnt from Plato, *viz.*, how to read the dialogues so that, in the words of Chaucer that serve as epigram to his text, 'the wordes be cosin to the dede'.

Beginning at the discursive level, Klein argues that Plato's writings transform the weakness of the written word into a strength. The weakness of the written word is that it is necessarily incomplete—it cannot properly address itself to the reader in her particularity. According to Klein, Plato attempts to 'remediate' this deficiency by accentuating it. This is done by heightening the sense that the dialogue is, as it stands, unfinished. 'A properly written text will have, therefore, to initiate this movement [of the discussion] and keep it alive by stringing it along decisive questions and partial or ambiguous answers'.⁴² In short, the dialogue is a work of protreptic which simulates Socrates' irony by its incompleteness.

We can, I believe, identify four types of incompleteness and four somewhat different activities of examination demanded by each. In the first place, Plato intimates that every philosophical discussion is unfinished because there are always further ideas to be worked through. For example, in book 1 of the *Republic*, Socrates

⁴² Klein 1989:17. He remarks that this incompleteness is 'in itself ... nothing but an outgrowth of Socrates' veiled way of speaking' (*ibid.*).

tells of how Cleitophon breaks into the argument, contending that Thrasymachus' view has been misrepresented, for the latter had intended to say that justice was the *perceived* advantage of the stronger (340a). The account is mooted but left hanging, for which reason the listener or reader is invited to follow up by contemplating, reinterpreting, and working it through. Such examination is one form of the participative activity that makes the dialogue whole.

Secondly, many Platonic dialogues are overtly aporetic: they are unfinished in the sense that they do not reach a conclusion about their subject matter. In fact, Socrates and his interlocutor nearly always fail to define the virtue under discussion; all of their *logoi* are shown to be deficient somehow. The reader must on account of this feel that she has not been taught anything. By suspending her in aporia, interpreted as a frustration of the desire to know, Plato tries to force her to join the discussion in an attempt to give a better account. This is a second form of participative activity that Plato seeks to produce in his audience by means of discursive incompleteness.

Thirdly, even those dialogues that are not formally aporetic are signalled to be deficient in various ways. For example, although the *Republic* is often thought to be a constructive dialogue, Socrates speaks of a 'longer way' that must be travelled to reach a satisfactory view of virtue and the soul.⁴³ This longer way is not travelled within the dialogue. Thus, it would seem that our business is to try to make progress, to take up Socrates' invitations to travel the longer road, and reach a conclusion—if, as Klein says, this is possible at all.⁴⁴ This must be, in part, what it means to play our role in the dialogue.

Fourthly, Socrates' arguments are incomplete in a more encompassing sense because he, holding something back, allows the discussion to follow incorrect paths. For example, the inconclusiveness of some dialogues can be traced to specific wrong turns (e.g., *Euthyp.* 14b–c, *Tht.* 186a–b, 187a.), which Socrates ironically permits, all the while also 'gesturing' to auditors or readers that they should look to see where the discussion went off course. In a similar vein, Schleiermacher writes of Plato's 'weaving a riddle out of contradictions, a riddle the only possible solution of which lies in the intended thought, and by often injecting, in a seemingly most strange and casual manner, one hint or another, which only he who is really and spontaneously engaged in searching notices and understands...'.⁴⁵

So much then for what the reader must attend to and do in order to play an active role in the argument. But this is only part of our business. Klein insists that we must not only pay attention to the word, or the argumentative *logos*, but also to the

⁴³ See Miller 2007:310ff.

⁴⁴ Klein 1989:7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 7, n.23.

deed, that is, what happens. A Platonic dialogue is a drama ‘in which what *happens* cannot be separated from what is said and argued about’.⁴⁶ What does Klein mean by this ‘mimetic complement’⁴⁷ of the argument, and how should we respond to it?

According to Klein, the dialogues are argumentatively unfinished but mimetically complete.⁴⁸ By this he means that the action of the dialogue answers the question about virtue that perplexes the interlocutors. The deed presented mimetically by the *logos* confers ‘the quality of completeness’ on the dialogues, as opposed to ‘their unfinished (aporetic) character in terms of the verbal argument’.⁴⁹ A presupposition of this claim is that the drama is self-reflexive, that is, embodies what it is about.⁵⁰ We can achieve a better understanding of Klein’s point by considering a few examples.

In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates approves of Euthyphro’s account of piety as a kind of service to the gods. He says that he almost gave a correct account, but that he veered off course because he was not willing to teach (14b–c). What is it that Euthyphro did not say? If we look at the argument of the dialogue, we notice that Socrates presents two interpretations of what this service (*therapeia*) might be, and both seem clearly unsatisfactory (13a–15c). But when we look at the action of the drama, we notice that Socrates enacts a kind of service by engaging Euthyphro in discussion. This service seems to consist of persuading him that the gods are good and motivating him to inquire more deeply into their nature. If this is correct, then, though the dialogue remains incomplete at the discursive level, it is mimetically complete: the answer to the question of piety is shown by an *ergon*, that is, by what Socrates does.

Socrates’ behaviour in the first book of the *Republic* provides another example of the way in which the mimetic aspect of the *logos* completes the conceptual discussion. In this context, Polemarchus, son of Cephalus, puts forward Simonides’ account of justice as giving to each what is fitting (332b–c). Yet this is apparently, as James Lachterman points out, what Socrates himself does in the dialogue:

[He] is presented to us as capable in deed of ‘doing justice’ to the partial and thus one-sided opinions, appearances, and desires of his interlocutors, that is,

⁴⁶ Klein 1985:309.

⁴⁷ Klein 1989:27.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ For further discussion, see Levine 2015.

as one who can find the right or fitting place for each part so that all can in principle be fitted together precisely with one another.⁵¹

The answer to the question of justice is given by the actions of Socrates, or perhaps, more specifically, by the knowledge manifested in his actions that enables him to find for each thing its proper place. Is this the knowledge that the reader will develop by his or her participation in a dialogue on justice?

The interplay between argument and action

So much, then, for the logical dimension of the dialogue considered in abstraction from its mimetic component. I have treated these points separately for didactic reasons, even though one of Klein's central claims is that they must not be separated; both are essential to the workings of the Platonic drama.⁵² It is now necessary to consider again how to play our part in the dialogue and engage in the business of self-examination by attending to and joining the argumentative and mimetic dimensions of the *logos*.

As I noted above, Plato's dialogues are not devoid of doctrines, and one significant subset of these are the Socratic paradoxes. Sometimes these claims are explicitly mooted and discussed, and they are always embodied in the action of the dialogue. What this means is that the truth or falsity of the 'paradox' is shown by what the characters do. For example, the interlocutor does not act well, and he does not know, articulately, what virtue is. This point applies to every dialogue of definition. Or, to give another illustration, Plato has Socrates deny that weakness of will is possible (*Prot.* 352bff.) and presents Crito as unable to restrain himself as he bursts into tears (*Phd.* 117d).

Plato's method is to present an argument or 'concept' together with the character and actions of the one who maintains, or rejects, or misunderstands it. When thinking about the 'philosophy' of Thrasymachus, we must therefore pay attention to the word, the deed, and the relationship between the two. Justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger—this is not merely a speech, but an expression of the way that somebody lives; it is a manifestation of an attempt to get the better of, and overpower, others. Thrasymachus' action and manner of speech and behaviour embodies his conception of justice. The incorrectness of his speech is shown in his deeds. Plato's point is that *logoi*, arguments, emanate from the soul of the arguer, expressing his point of view, insights, and limitations. His driving concern is not abstract reason, but the integration of discourse into life and character.

⁵¹ Lachterman 1989:150.

⁵² Klein 1989:18.

Earlier I referred to Socrates's irony, by which I meant his speaking to his audience by speaking to his interlocutor and, in particular, his use of words and phrases that the audience but not the interlocutor could be expected to understand. There is here another and more Platonic sense of irony applicable to the discrepancy between speech and deed in the discordance between what is said or thought and the actions or being of the agent who speaks or thinks. 'To ironize something is to place it...in whatever context will invalidate or correct it'.⁵³ This is the kind of irony applicable to what Klein calls 'doxological mimes', that is, the 'mimetic device' in which 'the falsity or rightness of an opinion is not only argued in words but also manifested by the character, the behavior, and the actions of the speakers themselves'.⁵⁴

To understand a Platonic dialogue, therefore, one must pay attention to the relationship between words and deeds: the way that some deeds underwrite some words; and, more commonly, the way that others contradict them. As Klein explains: '[the] interplay [between the mimetic and the argumentative functions of the *logos*] provides the texture into which we, listeners or readers, have to weave our thread'.⁵⁵ Finally, of course, we must bring all of this back to ourselves.

Klein says that the dialogue is an imitation of the work of Socrates, and it is plain, however precisely we understand this work, that he sought to get people to live the examined life. Yet it is equally clear that one can examine the *logos* with rather minimal self-examination, and thus, a question of how Plato sought to discourage the alienation of self from *logos* that might be called sophistry. Klein's answer to this question is, I believe, that Plato presents the *logos* with its mimetic complement. And he does this because mimesis facilitates self-recognition:⁵⁶ it is easier to recognise oneself in an image than by the presentation of a direct speech. This is a familiar point, the truth of which is manifest in the effectiveness of teaching by parables.

Now, Klein contends that we ourselves are being examined by Socrates and his irony. We must not watch and enjoy the irony as part of the spectacle; instead, we must use the *logos* to work on and care for our souls. This seems to involve two things: first, weighing the speeches, trying to see how the arguments fall short, and trying to do better; secondly, looking at the images and trying to see ourselves in these. We are, in other words, to use the interlocutors as mirrors. The mimetic element of the dialogue contributes the element of self-knowledge. Plato wants the reader to recognise that she is like those interlocutors who fail to speak correctly because they do not know. Our *logoi* are, as it were, emanations of the way that we

⁵³ Muecke 1969:23.

⁵⁴ Klein 1989:18.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ See Strauss 1965 lecture 2.

live. The deficiencies in our thinking about virtue are manifest both in what we say and what we do.

Earlier on I suggested that the success of a tragedy depends on the activity of the audience. I used this point to explain Klein's contention that we are part of the dialogue, for the coming to life of the play requires that the audience responds with the appropriate forms of activity. But it is clear that we could make a similar point from the other direction by saying that a play comes into being as a *drama*—etymologically speaking, something done—when actors breathe life into a script by speaking its words aloud and acting them out. The performance of the written text is then, as it were, an ontological condition on the being of the play.

Though Klein does not express himself in these terms, I think we might claim, putting the point in Plato's words, that the being of the play depends on an act of imitation—that is, the actor's pretending that he is somebody else. For a performer to enact the words of the play is for him to speak with the voice of another, with the voice and in the words of the character (*prosopon*) whose words they are. What is involved in bringing Clytemnestra to life in performance is then very different from what is required for one playing Socrates, though both are, in a way, infusions of soul into the playwright's words. But if there are in a Platonic drama no actors, just listeners or readers, then it seems that their, that is, our, proper relation to the mimetic and argumentative dimensions of the dialogue is nothing other than the act of breathing life into Socrates and his interlocutors. Our participation enables or would enable Plato to suspend the book form,⁵⁷ that is, bypass the limitations of the written word.⁵⁸

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, R E 1996. *The Dialogues of Plato, Volume 3: Ion, Hippias Minor, Laches, Protagoras*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Futter, D B 2015. Variations in philosophical genre: The Platonic dialogue. *Metaphilosophy* 46.2:246–262.
- Klein, J 1985. About Plato's *Philebus*. In R B Williamson and E Zuckerman (eds.), *Jacob Klein: Lectures and Essays*, 309–344. Annapolis, Maryland: St. John's College Press.
- Klein, J [1965] 1989. *A commentary on Plato's Meno*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵⁷ Klein 1989:7.

⁵⁸ I would like to thank two referees for *Akroterion* for thoughtful commentary on an earlier draft of this paper. I would also like to express my gratitude to Sjarlene Thom and Philip Bosman for assistance during the editorial process.

- Lachterman, D 1989. What is ‘the good’ of Plato’s *Republic*? *St. John’s Review* 39:139–171.
- Levine, D L 2015. *Profound ignorance: Plato’s Charmides and the saving of wisdom*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.
- Miller, M 2007. Beginning the ‘longer way’. In Ferrari, G R F (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato’s Republic*, 310–344. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Muecke, D C 1969. *The Compass of Irony*. London: Methuen.
- Nehamas, A 1998. *The Art of Living*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sachs, J 2004. *Plato’s Theaetetus*. Newburyport, Mass.: Focus Pub./R. Pullins Co.
- Schaerer, R 1938. *La question platonicienne. Étude sur les rapports de la pensée et de l’expression dans les dialogues*. Paris: J Vrin.
- Shelley, J 2022. The concept of the aesthetic. In Zalta, E N (ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy (spring 2022 edition)*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/aesthetic-concept/> (last accessed 12 January 2023).
- Strauss, L 1965. *Lectures on the Meno*. <http://www.leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/plato-meno-spring-quarter-1966/> (last accessed 12 January 2023).
- The editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2008. Phrynichus. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Phrynichus-Greek-tragic-poet/> (last accessed 12 January 2023).
- Williamson, R B & Zuckerman, E (eds.) 1985. *Lectures and essays*. Annapolis, Maryland: St. John’s College Press.